

give the visas to entry-level computer programmers, and increased its scrutiny of companies that hire workers on H-1Bs. As a result, the pace of H-1B approvals showed signs of slowing last year.

The decline in the percent of accepted applications suggests that the skilled worker drought isn't simply due to the atmosphere of racial exclusion created by Trump's rhetoric, or to the recent increase in hate crimes.

Thanks to Trump's restrictive policies, skilled workers from countries such as India are turning to Canada instead. Canada, where the racial anxieties of Trump's base are notably less prevalent, admits much greater numbers of high-skilled immigrants relative to its population. In 2017, it increased its intake of skilled workers by about 7.5 percent, and announced a new program to approve visas for these workers in two weeks – compared to six or seven months in the U.S.

So far, these trends have received little attention. Skilled immigration isn't the kind of issue that gets masses of activists marching in the streets. Democrats tend to focus on protection for undocumented immigrants. Republicans used to pay lip service to the idea of skilled immigration – and some still do – but spend the vast majority of their energy on trying to curb family-based legal immigration. Meanwhile, tech companies support more H-1Bs, but some workers oppose the program, believing that it steals jobs and/or reduces wages for native-born Americans.

This is a big problem, because skilled immigrants are a key part of the U.S. economy.

First of all, they're highly entrepreneurial – between 1995 and 2005, immigrants started more than half of the new businesses in Silicon Valley. As of 2011, more than 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were started by immigrants or their children. It's impossible to know ahead of time which immigrants will start these companies, but they're much more likely to be those with decent technical training who come from families with a tradition of starting businesses – in other words, skilled immigrants.

They're also highly innovative. A 2017 study by economists Ufuk Akcigit, John Grigsby and Tom Nicholas examined patenting records, and concluded:

Technology areas with higher levels of foreign-born expertise experienced much faster patent growth between 1940 and 2000, in terms of both quality and quantity, than otherwise equivalent technology areas.

They go on to list a number of famous American inventions whose creators were born elsewhere.

As for driving down native-born Americans' wages, there is evidence that the worry is vastly overblown. It's true that the H-1B program tethers employees to their employers; for a worker on an H-1B to switch to a different company, the procedure can be time-consuming and annoying. There is some evidence that companies that win the chance to hire

more H-1B workers pay lower wages. But there's also evidence showing that H-1B workers are not paid less than native-born Americans, after accounting for their age and skill level.

Moreover, studies that find negative impacts of H-1Bs tend to look only at the specific companies that hire skilled workers. The presence of more smart people in an industry or a city cause new ideas and technologies to flourish. These then diffuse to companies, allowing business to innovate faster, hire more workers and pay higher wages. Skilled foreigners help keep new ideas flowing in technology clusters like Silicon Valley; Austin, Texas; and Raleigh, North Carolina.

In addition, having a thick market of smart workers in an area allows a lot of innovative companies to cluster there. Tech companies put their offices in high-cost California because that's where the engineers live. And engineers move there because that's where the companies are.

This is why even if they lower wages at a particular company, H-1B workers raise native-born wages overall. A 2015 study by economists Giovanni Peri, Kevin Shih and Chad Sparber found:

Increases in [foreign] STEM workers are associated with significant wage gains for college-educated natives. Gains for non-college-educated natives are smaller but still significant. Our results imply that foreign STEM [workers] increased total factor productivity growth in US cities.

If Trump's immigration policies break this virtuous cycle, the tech industry could eventually decide to make its home elsewhere – in immigrant-friendly Canada, or even in emerging economies of China and India. That would result in many fewer good jobs, and lower wages, for American workers – skilled and unskilled alike.

The U.S. is playing a very dangerous game under Trump. By systematically degrading one of the nation's core strengths – the constant inflow of smart, entrepreneurial foreigners – Trump is putting the native-born populace at risk, not helping it. Instead of limiting the H-1B program, the U.S. should replace it with a Canada-style system that gives green cards to skilled foreign workers. It may not get many people marching in the streets, but skilled immigration is an issue that matters for the future of every American.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

Sanctuary Cities Putting Money In Hands Of Cartels, Trump Administration Says

By Stephen Dinan

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

Sanctuary cities are actually enticing more people to pay smugglers to help them make the dangerous trek north, not only putting people at risk but also enriching the smuggling cartels themselves, a senior administration official said Monday.

The senior official also gave sanctuary cities a choice: either allow his deportation officers in their jails to arrest illegal immigrants, or else he'll have to send the officers out into the streets to get people in the communities.

"The more people I have in the jail the less people I have to send out on the street to look for them," the official said, speaking on condition he not be named as part of a background briefing set up by the White House ahead of President Trump's trip to California Tuesday.

The White House did authorize Thomas Homan, deputy director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, to speak on the record, and he said he's seen police and sheriff's departments pull out of anti-drug and anti-smuggling task forces because of the sanctuary laws.

"Local law enforcement had to leave these task forces because they weren't allowed to work on them," he said.

Officials billed the call as a chance to answer what they said were misconceptions about sanctuary city policies, particularly in California. That state last year enacted three laws that prevent local law enforcement from asking people their immigration status and from holding migrants for pickup by ICE, and limits how much information they're allowed to provide to ICE officers; orders businesses to refuse voluntary cooperation with ICE; and orders state investigators to probe the federal government's handling of immigrants held in detention facilities in the state.

The Justice Department last week sued to block those three laws, prompting an outraged response from Democrats who control the state's government.

"This is basically going to war against the state of California," Gov. Jerry Brown said.

He bristled at accusations that federal officers were being blocked from access to local jails.

"That's not true. We know the Trump administration is full of liars," he said.

Mr. Homan, though, said the state's own sheriff's association has said it cannot fully cooperate with federal authorities under the outlines of Mr. Brown's law.

Mr. Homan also blasted U.S. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who called ICE enforcement actions last month "unjust and cruel."

Mrs. Pelosi and other anti-Trump politicians have urged ICE to focus on illegal immigrants with what they deem serious crimes on their records, and forgo deporting most illegal immigrants.

Mr. Homan countered that Mrs. Pelosi and others in Congress can change the laws, but for now, the laws give his agents and officers the duty of arresting people in the country

illegally and putting them through the immigration courts, where they are ordered deported — orders his agency then must carry out.

The senior administration official gave a detailed list of ills he said stemmed from California's sanctuary laws, saying the cartels that control all of the human smuggling across the U.S.-Mexico border are using sanctuaries as "a selling point" to would-be illegal immigrants.

"This sort of carrot-dangling ... is going to entice more illegal immigrants," the official said, adding that means more money going to the same cartels that also could smuggle in weapons, drugs and even terrorists.

"We're bankrolling them with these sanctuary policies," the official said.

When ICE is seeking an illegal immigrant target and knows the person has been booked into a local prison or jail it will send a detainer request both asking to be notified before the person is released, and for the person to be held for up to 48 hours after the normal release point for pickup.

The senior official said ICE has concluded both requests are legal, but he would be satisfied if local law enforcement at least gave the heads-up before release, giving his officers a chance to collect targets before they're released into the community.

He said one officer operating in a jail can process 10 illegal immigrants in a day, but if those 10 are all released it takes six-man teams days, weeks or even months to track them down out in the community, where everyone is at more risk.

ICE Director Hits California Democrats

By Luis Sanchez

The Hill, March 12, 2018

Acting Director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Thomas Homan on Monday slammed House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) for their recent criticisms against his agency.

During a press call with reporters, Homan slammed Pelosi for characterizing ICE as a threat to immigrant communities.

"How dare she say we are terrorizing communities," Homan said, arguing that it's the immigrants in country illegally that ICE arrested who are posing the threat.

Homan argued that ICE does not arrest innocent people and said that, during the agency's operation in Los Angeles in February, 88 percent of the people arrested were convicted criminals.

He added that in all of California, 81 percent of those arrested by ICE were criminals.

"Her quote was beyond the pale," Homan said.

"Just last week, President Trump decided to terrorize innocent immigrant families in the Bay Area with his unjust

and cruel raids," Pelosi said on Wednesday about recent ICE immigration raids. "The President has now desperately decided to brazenly abuse the legal system to push his mass deportation agenda."

The acting director also went after Feinstein, who had said the Trump administration was targeting California to score political points with his base.

Homan said that ICE was merely enforcing immigration laws that Congress had empowered them to execute.

"If people don't like it, people like Nancy Pelosi and Dianne Feinstein can certainly change the law, they are legislators," Homan said.

He also criticized Feinstein for attacking ICE even though she voted in favor of the Immigration Control and Financial Responsibility Act of 1996 that gave ICE the authority to carry out such operations.

The ICE chief also recently went after Oakland's mayor after she warned her city about upcoming immigration raids before they were carried out.

"She gave them warning, and there's 800 that we were unable to locate because of that warning, so that community is a lot less safe than it would have been," Homan said on "Fox & Friends."

The Trump administration sued California last week over three laws that it claims prevent immigration officials from enforcing federal immigration laws.

Trump will visit California for his first time as president on Tuesday to inspect prototypes for his proposed wall along the southern border.

White House Slams 'Sanctuary' Supporters In Advance Of Trump Visit

By Josh Gerstein

Politico, March 12, 2018

As President Donald Trump prepares for his first trip to California since taking office more than a year ago, the White House is lashing back at prominent Golden State politicians who've trained their fire on Trump's aggressive enforcement of immigration laws.

The acting head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement — Thomas Homan — took aim Monday night at House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi for denouncing Trump's immigration policies as "cowardly" and for accusing immigration officers of terrorizing immigrants in California.

"How dare she say we're terrorizing immigrant communities?" Homan said in a conference call the White House organized with reporters. "Our officers are protecting the immigrant community in many ways."

Pelosi has repeatedly declared Trump's enforcement efforts as "cowardly," invoking the term last year in response to a decision to end protections for Nicaraguan citizens who've been in the U.S. for a couple of decades, to

immigration raids launched in California earlier this year and to a lawsuit the Trump administration filed last week challenging the constitutionality of three so-called "sanctuary" laws the state passed last year.

However, the immigration chief said Pelosi's remarks were an insult to his officers.

"You're talking about law enforcement people that get up every day and leave the safety and security of their home and their families and strap a gun to their hip every day to defend this nation. That's the farthest thing from cowards you're ever going to see," Homan said. "So, her quotes were just beyond the pale."

Homan also faulted Pelosi and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) for criticizing ICE officers who are carrying out Congressional directives.

"If people don't like it, people like Nancy Pelosi and Dianne Feinstein, they can change the law, they're legislators," he said.

Homan argued that by denying immigration officers access to local jails, local and state officials are endangering those officers and increasing the chance that a wanted immigrant's family members and associates will be arrested in a raid carried out in the community. He also faulted Gov. Jerry Brown (D-Calif.) and others for denying ICE access to a California database tracking suspected gang members.

In another portion of the call, two Trump administration officials who spoke on condition of anonymity accused sanctuary jurisdictions of bankrolling human smuggling operations by encouraging would-be illegal immigrants to believe they will face few consequences in the U.S. The federal officials also defended the use of immigration laws to detain anyone in the country illegally, regardless of their criminal history or ties to the United States.

"When we remove someone who's been here and has a U.S. citizen child, they're difficult cases, these are not easy cases for us," said one official. "You shouldn't get a pass just because you're able to hide well for ten years. And they know they're in the country and they choose to have a child in this country knowing it'll be a U.S. citizen by virtue of birth, they put themselves in that position. So, to vilify the men and women of ICE for enforcing the law and to execute a judge's orders that are lawfully given, it's just unfair to the men and women of ICE to put them in that position."

Trump also turned his attention to the immigration issue in advance of his trip, which is expected to include a stop to visit border wall prototypes being tested near San Diego. On Monday, he retweeted a message from Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), urging that the federal government cut off funds to so-called "sanctuary" jurisdictions.

"The president did say the omnibus should not fund the sanctuary cities," White House spokesman Hogan Gidley said.

The administration is already seeking to block cities and states with so-called "sanctuary" policies from certain Justice Department and Homeland Security Department grant funds. Supreme Court ruling restrict the federal government's authority to tie other funding or all federal funding to such conditions.

'We Don't Arrest Innocent People'

Washington Examiner, March 13, 2018

Acting Director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement Tom Homan said his agency does not arrest law-abiding people, after it was revealed ICE officers have been arresting individuals who have allegedly breached U.S. immigration laws in California.

"We don't arrest innocent people," Homan told reporters Monday evening.

The comments were made in response to House Minority Leader Nancy, D-Calif., who has slammed the raids as "intended solely to terrorize innocent immigrant families and instill fear in the hearts of our communities" rather than protect Americans.

Homan said Pelosi's comments were "beyond the pale" and argued the people ICE arrested are the ones who terrorize immigrant communities.

Additionally, administration officials pushed back on claims concerning "sanctuary cities," where policies passed by local governments instruct law enforcement to not turn over illegal immigrants to federal officials without a warrant. Administration officials told reporters Monday evening sanctuary cities harm public safety and argued sanctuary cities specifically harm immigrant communities because they allow criminals to be released back into their communities.

"This is an area where there should be broad bipartisan consensus," an administration official said.

Homan also reiterated ICE is enforcing U.S. law and said if Pelosi and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., do not support the current laws, they should change them.

The comments come after more than 150 people suspected of violating federal immigration laws were arrested by ICE late last month. Those arrested now are facing prosecution or deportation, Homan said last week.

Additionally, the Justice Department filed a lawsuit last week in a Sacramento federal court that argues three California laws passed last year undermine federal immigration law. The Trump administration supports nullifying the laws.

'Beyond The Pale:' ICE Chief Blasts California Dems For Attacking Immigration Agents

By Will Racke

Daily Caller, March 12, 2018

Immigration and Customs Enforcement Acting Director Thomas Homan charged leading California Democrats

Monday, saying they were deliberately distorting the nature and purpose of recent immigration operations in the state.

Homan singled out House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who in February said a targeted ICE operation in northern California was a "bigoted" attempt to "terrorize innocent immigrant families."

Pelosi's comments were "beyond the pale," the ICE chief said.

"Our ICE officers are protecting immigrant communities" by arresting criminal aliens who live among law-abiding immigrants, Homan told reporters. ICE officers "don't arrest innocent people" during targeted operations, Homan said and added they arrest only those with previous criminal convictions or pending orders of removal.

Homan, whose nomination to become the permanent ICE director is stalled in the Senate, also heaped on two of Pelosi's fellow California Democrats — Gov. Jerry Brown and Sen. Dianne Feinstein — for their own criticism of the agency's work in the state. Feinstein, in particular, seemed to be attacking ICE in hypocritical fashion, he noted.

"She voted for the very laws we're enforcing," he said, referring Feinstein's support of the Immigration Control and Financial Responsibility Act of 1996, which stiffened penalties for some immigration-related offenses.

Homan's comments came on the eve of President Donald Trump's visit to California, which has become hostile territory as far as his administration's immigration agenda is concerned. California under Brown has become the nation's foremost sanctuary state, thanks to a series of new laws that sharply circumscribe cooperation between immigration authorities and local officials, police and businesses.

The Trump administration responded last week by suing California over its sanctuary laws. California's policies amounted to a subversion of federal law, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in a speech to Sacramento law enforcers.

"There is no nullification; there is no secession," Sessions said. "Federal law is the supreme law of the land. A refusal to apprehend and deport those, especially the criminal element, effectively rejects all immigration law and creates an open borders system."

"Open borders is a radical, irrational idea that cannot be accepted," Sessions added.

Trump's administration is seeking to correct what it sees as a misguided view of sanctuary cities journalists and liberal politicians hold, amid heated rhetoric on both sides of the debate. Far from protecting immigrants, sanctuary jurisdictions enable dangerous criminal aliens to commit more crimes in the heavily immigrant communities in which they live, a senior administration said.

Trump Immigration Officials Take Aim At California Politicians Ahead Of Presidential Visit

By Noah Bierman

Los Angeles Times, March 12, 2018

White House officials ratcheted up their fight with California politicians over immigration policies ahead of President Trump's visit Tuesday, briefing reporters Monday night on what they called "misconceptions" being propagated by leading Democrats in the state.

Thomas D. Homan, acting director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, took particular exception to a comment by House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco, who contended last week that the administration was engaged in "cowardly attacks" against immigrants when the Justice Department sued the state over its immigration laws.

"Her quotes were just beyond the pale," Homan said, taking Pelosi's words as an attack on immigration officers.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, blamed Russia and its allies Monday for violating a humanitarian ceasefire in Syria, and excoriated the U.N. Security Council for failing to guarantee the truce.

Haley also warned that the Trump administration "remains prepared to act," as it did last April when U.S. missiles were fired at a Syrian government airbase that was used to drop nerve gas on civilians.

"It is not the path we prefer, but it is a path we have demonstrated we will take, and we are prepared to take again," Haley told the Security Council, which met in special session. "When the international community consistently fails to act, there are times when states are compelled to take their own action."

President Trump plans to host Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the White House next week, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders announced Monday.

Prince Mohammed attracted controversy in November when he orchestrated a purge of dozens of people, including sitting cabinet members and a fellow prince. The move was seen as an effort to consolidate power. The regime portrayed the sweep as a crackdown on corruption and an effort to attract foreign investment and reduce the country's historic dependence on oil.

Sanders declined to say whether Trump would raise human rights issues with the heir to the throne.

President Trump's well-documented clashes with California owe plenty to politics, culture and personality. But at bottom, what drives the president's toxic relationship with the nation's most populous state is this: his near-obsessive desire to be seen as a winner.

No state represents losing for Trump more than California, whether in business or politics. No surprise, then, that he didn't rush to visit. He arrives on Tuesday later into his term than any president since Franklin D. Roosevelt, back when presidents weren't flying routinely; FDR crossed the continent by train.

Warnings begin as soon as you arrive. Beware of the potholes.

They're everywhere in this Michigan city near Detroit, rattling travelers' teeth and popping tires, making for a lunar-like obstacle course. Local television newscasters hand out gift cards for tire repairs amid their reports on banged wheel rims and stranded motorists. "POTHELL!!!" blared a recent headline in the Detroit Free Press.

Republicans desperate to hold onto a congressional seat in the heart of Trump country received more bad news Monday, just days after the president parachuted into western Pennsylvania to give their struggling candidate a boost.

Republican Rick Saccone, according to a new Monmouth University poll, is still losing ground in Tuesday's election to fill a vacant seat in the district near Pittsburgh that Trump won by 20 points. Some \$8 million in spending by national Republican groups aimed at propping up the state lawmaker hasn't seemed to give him the boost he badly needs to take a lead against his political-neophyte opponent, Conor Lamb.

The poll found Lamb leading 51% to 45% if turnout reflects the patterns of other similar special elections held this year, in which there was a Democratic surge. Even if turnout is lackluster, as it tends to be for a routine special election, the poll still shows Lamb winning by two points.

Minutes before President Trump entered the White House Roosevelt Room on Thursday to announce sweeping tariffs on imported metals, the president's economic A-team stood stone-faced near the president's podium — but not Peter Navarro.

The 68-year-old former UC Irvine economics professor looked almost gleeful as he waited for Trump to issue final orders levying 25% duties on foreign steel and 10% on aluminum, all in the name of national security.

Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin on Sunday defended President Trump's spree of name-calling at a campaign rally on Saturday night, including the president's renewed mocking of Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles) as "a very low IQ individual."

At the raucous Pennsylvania rally for Republican House candidate Rick Saccone, Trump derided Waters for calling for his impeachment, imitating her as supposedly declaring, "We will impeach him. We will impeach the president. But he hasn't done anything wrong. It doesn't matter, we will impeach him."

Mnuchin, appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press," said Trump's verbal assaults were intended to be humorous.

President Trump tweeted Saturday that he believes North Korea won't conduct any more missile tests as he plans to meet with the country's leader, Kim Jong Un.

It was a noteworthy vote of confidence in North Korea's intentions as the leaders of the two countries prepare for what could be a historic meeting.

North Korea has been testing intercontinental ballistic missiles that may be capable of carrying a nuclear weapon across the Pacific Ocean to the continental United States.

The Trump administration Saturday took a step toward possibly banning "bump stocks," proposing new regulations to prohibit ownership of the controversial equipment that allows semiautomatic rifles to fire at automatic speeds.

Under the proposed rule from the the Department of Justice, bump stocks would be classified as machine guns that are currently banned under federal law.

"President Trump is absolutely committed to ensuring the safety and security of every American," Atty. Gen. Jeff Sessions said in a statement.

Trump Administration: Moving 'Sanctuary' Lawsuit To San Francisco 'Makes No Sense'

Josh Gerstein on the Courts, Transparency, & More
By Josh Gerstein

Politico, March 12, 2018

The Trump administration will oppose efforts to move the federal government's newly filed lawsuit over California's so-called sanctuary laws to San Francisco from Sacramento, according to a new court filing.

In a submission to Sacramento-based U.S. District Court Judge John Mendez on Monday, Justice Department lawyers seemed to ridicule the transfer proposal floated last week by attorneys from the office of state Attorney General Xavier Becerra.

"It is remarkable that the State of California would seek to delay this matter primarily so that it can avoid litigating in its State capital. There is no basis to seriously entertain this request that the case be transferred," Justice Department lawyers wrote. "California's wish to defend these challenges in another federal judicial district in San Francisco, where the State capital is not located and where the official Defendants do not reside, makes no sense."

Lawyers from Justice's Office of Immigration Litigation called the state's transfer suggestion "meritless," despite the fact that attorneys for the state have yet to file a formal motion seeking the transfer. In a scheduling filing last Friday, lawyers from Becerra's office said a transfer to San Francisco would be warranted because a judge there is already considering a case that involves a federal law seeking to prohibit certain local and state policies from preventing cooperation with immigration authorities.

Justice Department attorneys, however, pointed out on Monday that the suit California filed against the federal government last year has to do with the Trump administration's efforts to condition federal grants on certain immigration-related policies, while the new suit alleges that new California laws are unconstitutional because they interfere with Congress' attempts to set national immigration policy.

"That case is about the Attorney General's authority to issue law enforcement grants and the limits on that authority," the federal lawyers wrote. This case is about whether three California laws violate the Supremacy Clause. Any overlap between the cases is minimal, and limited to just certain arguments concerning one of the three laws challenged here."

In the new filing, the Justice Department also asserted that Gov. Jerry Brown and Becerra — both named as defendants in the new suit — "can hardly argue that it is more convenient for them and their employees to travel some 90 miles to San Francisco rather than walk a few city blocks to this courthouse for proceedings."

Just a day before the Trump administration filed suit in Sacramento last week, the judge handling the San Francisco case — U.S. District Court Judge William Orrick — rejected the state's request for a preliminary injunction against enforcement of the federal law targeting sanctuary policies.

However, the state appears to prefer to have the new suit heard by Orrick, who issued both preliminary and permanent injunctions blocking enforcement of an early executive order from President Donald Trump that appeared to seek to limit the flow of federal funds to jurisdictions with sanctuary policies.

Orrick was appointed by President Barack Obama. Mendez, the judge who was assigned the suit filed in Sacramento last Tuesday, is an appointee of President George W. Bush.

Josh Gerstein is a senior reporter for POLITICO.

Federal Law Reigns On Immigration. California, Cooperate With ICE

By Robert C. Bonner

Sacramento (CA) Bee, March 12, 2018

In our federal system, state and local officials cannot pick and choose which federal laws they wish to follow. However, this is exactly what is occurring as California politicians have taken increasingly overt measures to keep the federal government from deporting migrants here illegally.

While standing in the way of immigration enforcement might seem like the "right thing to do," as Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf put it, her warning was an affirmative act that prevented the federal government from legally arresting

fugitives – many of them criminals. It's one thing to disagree with federal law; it is another to obstruct it.

Regardless of the legal outcome, it makes sense for local officials to provide a basic level of cooperation. Not only would this help prevent criminals who are in the country illegally from preying on others, but it would also reduce the need for ICE officers to go out into the community to apprehend these individuals.

Unfortunately, heated rhetoric, like the salvos exchanged last week by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Gov. Jerry Brown, does little to promote rational discourse. So, what are the merits of the federal government's lawsuit against the state of California challenging three laws designed to protect individuals illegally in the U.S. from deportation by federal authorities?

Under the U.S. Constitution, the responsibility for making and enforcing immigration laws lies with the federal government, not the state of California. Simply put, this means that when Congress enacts a law, the executive branch of the federal government has the responsibility to enforce it, in this case through U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

U.S. immigration law makes it illegal for an alien without authorization to enter or stay in the U.S. Under federal law, it is ICE's responsibility to remove foreign citizens who are illegally present in the United States to their country of origin.

Under the U.S. Constitution's supremacy clause, federal law prevails over state laws that conflict with or otherwise thwart the ability of federal officials to enforce federal law. This is fundamental to making our federal system work, and it is at the core of the DOJ's lawsuit.

One of the challenged California laws requires employers to notify employees 72 hours after receiving an ICE inspection notice and subjects an employer to substantial fines for failure to do so. Yet by doing so, an employer who fails to give this "notice to flee" is potentially subject to a federal charge of obstructing justice.

Another, contrary to federal law, gives the California attorney general authority to access records of aliens being detained on ICE's behalf. A third law, Senate Bill 54, prohibits local officials, principally sheriffs who run the local jails, from notifying ICE regarding release dates of convicted criminal aliens or otherwise cooperating with ICE, unless the alien has been convicted of one of a listed number of crimes.

In all likelihood, the federal courts will strike down the first two provisions, but SB 54 is a closer question. Under our federal system, although cooperation between federal and local and state authorities is the norm – indeed, our federal system would not function well without it – there is no requirement that local officials affirmatively assist the federal government in carrying out federal law.

However, regardless of the legal outcome on this point, for public safety reasons, it makes sense for local officials to

provide a basic level of cooperation, such as timely notice to ICE before release of deportable, criminal aliens. Not only would this help prevent criminals who are in the country illegally from being returned back to their community to prey on others, but it would also reduce the need for ICE officers to go out into the community to apprehend these individuals.

ICE is much maligned. But Californians should keep in mind that its officers are only enforcing the laws Congress enacted. While the state has no obligation to assist ICE, under our federal system it should refrain from impeding it.

Robert C. Bonner is a former federal district judge and former commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Reach him at rbonner@phillipsandr.com.

Jeff Sessions' Lawsuit Against California Only Makes One Good Argument

By Erwin Chemerinsky

[Sacramento \(CA\) Bee](#), March 12, 2018

The United States suit against California is not the first time the federal government has sued a state, but it is the only time I can think of where such a suit was brought against a state government that was trying to do more to protect the rights of its residents.

Typically, the U.S. government has sued a state to enforce civil rights, such as the Obama administration's litigation against Georgia to protect students with disabilities and against North Carolina for discriminating against transgender students. In fact, throughout American history, "states' rights" have been invoked as an excuse for state governments to have slavery or maintain segregation or resist federal civil rights laws.

Now, though, federalism has been turned on its head and it is California invoking states' rights to protect its residents from the Trump administration's repressive federal immigration policies. It is ironic to see conservatives who for so long have championed states' rights now embracing federal power.

The suit filed by the Justice Department concerns three different California laws. The Trump administration claims that each statute is preempted by federal law because it impedes federal immigration enforcement efforts.

One statute being challenged is the California Values Act, which prevents state and local agencies in California from sharing information with federal immigration officers about criminals or suspects unless they have been convicted of serious crimes. In other words, cities in California are not allowed to tell Immigrations and Customs Enforcement about people in their jails until and unless there has been a conviction for a serious crime.

Astoundingly, after this was enacted, Thomas D. Homan, the acting director of United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said that the state elected officials

who support the policy should be arrested. "We've got to start charging some of these politicians with crimes," he said.

Under Supreme Court precedents, this California law should be upheld. The Supreme Court has ruled that the federal government cannot coerce state and local governments to cooperate with federal mandates.

For example, in *Printz v. United States* in 1997, the court declared unconstitutional a provision of the federal Brady Handgun Control Act which required that state and local governments do background checks before issuing permits for firearms. The court said that this impermissibly commandeered state and local governments. Likewise, forcing state and local governments to share information is unconstitutionally coercing their actions.

A second aspect of the federal suit concerns a part of the state budget bill that gives the state attorney general the power to monitor immigration detention centers in the state. A state has no authority to monitor federal facilities.

But this is about local jails that contract with the federal government to hold detainees and private facilities that contract with the federal government. Here, California is again on strong constitutional grounds to make sure that those detained in the state are treated humanely and their rights are respected. The state is not impeding the federal government's immigration policies when it inspects the conditions of detention facilities.

Finally, the lawsuit challenges the California Immigrant Worker Protection Act, which prohibits employers, or persons acting on behalf of the employer, from providing "voluntary consent" to the entry of an immigration enforcement agent to "any nonpublic areas of a place of labor." The law also prohibits employers, or persons acting on behalf of the employer, from providing "voluntary consent" to an immigration enforcement agent "to access, review, or obtain the employer's employee records."

Employers who violate these provisions are subject to civil penalties of \$2,000 to \$5,000 for a first violation, and \$5,000 to \$10,000 for each subsequent violation. Simply put, the law prohibits employers from allowing immigration officials into the non-public areas of workplaces or from sharing information about employees unless there is a subpoena or a warrant.

This provision is most vulnerable to challenge. The federal government has its strongest claim that the state is interfering with federal immigration enforcement. At the same time, the federal law is not compelling any action by the state or local governments.

Underlying this lawsuit are vastly different perspectives about immigration law. Donald Trump and Jeff Sessions see undocumented immigrants as dangerous criminals who must be deported. California sees people who contribute greatly to the states' economy and views the federal policy as one that will break up families, deport Dreamers, and ruin lives.

This is a battle that will continue throughout the Trump years in the White House. The lawsuit is just the most recent chapter in this fight.

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California's Pro-Immigrant SB 54 Law Should Survive Trump Attack

By Noah Feldman

[Bloomberg View](#), March 12, 2018

Donald Trump's first visit as president to the hostile territory of California highlights his struggle with the state. Most recently that battle has been over the sanctuary laws that the state Legislature has passed and that Trump's lawyers have challenged in court.

Yet it's worth recalling that California has a long history of acting like a republic unto itself on immigration — and that, not so long ago, the state was more hostile to immigrants than the federal government, not less.

Travel in time with me back to 1994. At that time, the state voted overwhelmingly (59 percent to 41 percent) by referendum to adopt Proposition 187, also known as the Save Our State initiative (SOS, get it?). Republican Pete Wilson was governor, and he rode his support for the initiative to a successful run for a second term.

Prop 187 was the polar opposite of the sanctuary laws recently adopted by the state. It imposed an affirmative obligation on California law-enforcement officials who suspected that an arrestee might be undocumented to investigate the person's immigration status and report the person to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Local governments were ordered to comply.

The same investigation requirement applied to anyone seeking public benefits from the state — benefits like health care, education and welfare that the initiative expressly denied to undocumented people.

Pro-immigrant advocates challenged Prop 187 in federal court. A district court blocked almost every aspect of the initiative from taking effect. The judge's reasoning was that Congress, not California, has legal authority over immigration. "California," she held, "is powerless to enact its own legislative scheme to regulate immigration ... It is likewise powerless to enact its own legislative scheme to regulate alien access to public benefits."

Governor Wilson filed an appeal, but when Democrat Gray Davis succeeded him, in 1999, he withdrew the appeal in favor of a mediation that ended up scrapping the initiative.

The judge's ruling accurately depicted the politics of the initiative: California voters wanted to establish their own immigration regime, far harsher than the one adopted by federal law.

Today California politics have changed markedly — but the state is still pursuing a policy strikingly different from federal norms.

Senate Bill 54, which is now state law, specifically prohibits state and local law enforcement officials from investigating arrestees' immigration status or reporting that status to federal authorities. This is, of course, 180 degrees opposite from Prop 187, which demanded investigation and reporting.

The Justice Department has challenged SB 54 as well as two other state sanctuary laws in court. Unsurprisingly, the feds' legal theory is that California is once again pre-empting the federal authority to make immigration policy.

The two other laws may actually go too far. One makes it a crime for private business owners in the state to cooperate voluntarily with federal officials performing investigations in the workplace. That probably interferes too much with federal authority, not to mention the employers' liberty.

The second law creates a system whereby the state attorney general would investigate federal immigration officials' enforcement efforts. There's no strong reason a state couldn't investigate federal officials suspected of a crime; but this law looks like a state effort to impede federal law enforcement, which exceeds the state's authority.

But SB 54 is lawful. Under Supreme court precedent, the federal government can't "commandeer" state officials to do its bidding in law enforcement. That means the federal government can't make California law enforcement investigate or report immigration status. It also means California can decline to expend its resources to enforce federal law.

The legal difference between Prop 187 and SB 54 is the result of the structure in the Constitution as interpreted by the courts. Congress has the right to occupy any field of law within its authority. But it can't coerce or blackmail states to do its will.

In parallel, states can't pass laws in areas where Congress is in control — but they can refuse to help the federal government enforce laws Congress has passed.

This constitutional doctrine reflects an attempt (imperfect, to be sure) to balance states' rights against federal authority. The enduring political reality is that some states want to go their own way on issues of major national importance.

California's political views have changed, but California's sense of itself as a quasi-republic far from Washington and entitled to make its own rules hasn't changed.

Trump's visit, then, serves as a powerful reminder that no president can impose his will throughout the country. The president of the United States doesn't rule. He governs —

and even that power can only be exercised in conjunction with Congress.

Federalism is a delicate system that needs constant care, feeding and updating by the courts. But when it works, its successes follow from the recognition that a big country includes many different perspectives and beliefs.

The Chinese have a maxim for it: "The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away." Donald Trump isn't the emperor, despite his apparent frustration with that reality. The Rockies — and federalism — keep him from becoming one.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

Americans Continue To Oppose U.S.-Mexico Border Wall – CBS News Poll

CBS News, March 12, 2018

As President Trump plans to visit California Tuesday to see prototypes for a U.S. – Mexico border wall, the idea of building a border wall continues to be unpopular with most Americans, and sharp partisan splits remain. Most Republicans support it, while most Democrats and independents oppose it. These percentages have held steady over time.

We find partisan divides over whether "sanctuary cities" can refuse to assist federal efforts in detaining or deporting illegal immigrants; President Donald Trump visits California amid legal battles between the Justice Department and the state. Half of Americans – and most Democrats – think cities should be allowed to deal with illegal immigrants as they see fit, while another half of Americans – and most Republicans – think such cities should be forced to comply with federal anti-immigration efforts.

On the broader principle of whether states or the Federal government should have power on immigration laws, partisans not only divide, but have switched places in recent years. Republicans today say the Federal government should have authority, not the states – a notion they rejected when President Barack Obama was in the White House and Arizona was drawing attention for passing its own measures; today most Democrats say the states should have power, having reversed their thinking from 2010.

This poll was conducted by telephone March 8-11, 2018 among a random sample of 1,223 adults nationwide. Data collection was conducted on behalf of CBS News by SSRS of Glen Mills, PA. Phone numbers were dialed from samples of both standard land-line and cell phones.

The poll employed a random digit dial methodology. For the landline sample, a respondent was randomly selected from all adults in the household. For the cell sample, interviews were conducted with the person who answered the phone.

Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish using live interviewers. The data have been weighted to reflect U.S. Census figures on demographic variables.

The error due to sampling for results based on the entire sample could be plus or minus three percentage points. The error for subgroups may be higher and is available by request. The margin of error includes the effects of standard weighting procedures which enlarge sampling error slightly.

This poll release conforms to the Standards of Disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

ICE Spokesman Resigns Over Falsehoods He Said Were Spread By Trump Administration After Raids

San Diego Union-Tribune, March 12, 2018

A spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in San Francisco resigned his post, disillusioned by what he called false claims spread by Trump administration officials after a four-day raid in Northern California last month, according to reports.

"I just couldn't bear the burden, continuing on as a representative of the agency and charged with upholding integrity, knowing that information was false," James Schwab told CNN.

The story was first reported by the San Francisco Chronicle.

The controversy stems from the warning sent by Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf before the raid, in which she urged immigrants in the country illegally to take precautions.

In a news release during the sweep, ICE's acting director, Thomas Homan, said that "864 criminal aliens and public safety threats remain at large in the community, and I have to believe that some of them were able to elude us thanks to the mayor's irresponsible decision."

Homan later appeared on "Fox and Friends" and blasted Schaaf's alert, saying she helped an estimated 800 "criminal aliens" avoid capture.

Schwab told CNN he thought that number was inflated.

"It's a false statement because we never pick up 100% of our targets. And to say they're a type of dangerous criminal is also misleading," he said.

When he raised his concerns to ICE leadership, Schwab said he was instructed to "deflect to previous statements. Even though those previous statements did not clarify the wrong information."

U.S. Atty. Gen. Jeff Sessions repeated the claim at the 26th annual Law Enforcement Legislative Day last week, saying agents "failed to make 800 arrests that they would have made if the mayor had not acted as she did."

"Those are 800 wanted aliens that are now at large in that community — most are wanted criminals that ICE will now have to pursue with more difficulty in more dangerous

situations, all because of one mayor's irresponsible action," Sessions said.

Last month's sweep netted 232 arrests of people suspected of violating immigration laws. Of those, 115 had prior convictions for "serious or violent" crimes or "significant or multiple" misdemeanors.

Schwab called the mayor's alert misguided and not responsible.

"I think she could have had other options," he said. "But to blame her for 800 dangerous people out there is just false."

ICE Spokesman In SF Resigns And Slams Trump Administration Officials

By Dan Simon

CNN, March 12, 2018

James Schwab, a spokesman for the San Francisco Division of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, has resigned, citing what he says are falsehoods being spread by members of the Trump administration including Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

"I just couldn't bear the burden — continuing on as a representative of the agency and charged with upholding integrity, knowing that information was false," he told CNN on Monday.

Schwab cited Acting Director Tom Homan and Attorney General Jeff Sessions as being the purveyors of misleading and inaccurate information, following Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf's controversial decision to warn the community of an upcoming ICE raid.

ICE released a press release on February 27 about the operations in Northern California in which Homan stated that "864 criminal aliens and public safety threats remain at large in the community, and I have to believe that some of them were able to elude us thanks to the mayor's irresponsible decision."

Sessions also repeated a similar estimate in his remarks while visiting Sacramento last week.

"Those are 800 wanted criminals that are now at large in that community — 800 wanted criminals that ICE will now have to pursue with more difficulty in more dangerous situations, all because of one mayor's irresponsible action," Sessions had said.

Schwab said he took issue with their characterization.

Jeff Sessions takes immigration fight to California, announces lawsuit

"Director Homan and the Attorney General said there were 800 people at large and free to roam because of the actions of the Oakland Mayor," he told CNN. "Personally I think her actions were misguided and not responsible. I think she could have had other options. But to blame her for 800 dangerous people out there is just false."

"It's a false statement because we never pick up 100% of our targets. And to say they're a type of dangerous criminal is also misleading."

Schwab said he brought up his concerns to ICE leadership and was told to "deflect to previous statements. Even though those previous statements did not clarify the wrong information."

"I've never been in this situation in 16 almost 17 years in government where someone asked me to deflect when we absolutely knew something was awry – when the data was not correct" he said.

Schwab also said he is a registered Democrat, but has been a loyal federal servant, regardless of which party is in power.

CNN has reached out to ICE in Washington and the Department of Justice for comment.

San Francisco's ICE Spokesman Quits, Disputes Agency's Claim That 800 Eluded Arrest

San Francisco Chronicle, March 13, 2018

The San Francisco spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement resigned after the agency's recent Northern California sweep, saying he couldn't continue to do his job after Trump administration officials made false public statements about a key aspect of the operation.

James Schwab told The Chronicle on Monday that he was frustrated by repeated statements by officials, including U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, that roughly 800 undocumented immigrants escaped arrest because of Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf's Feb. 24 warning to the public about the four-day operation, issued the night before federal officers began staking out homes and knocking on doors.

Schwab wanted the agency to correct the number, which he understood to be far lower, and didn't want to deflect media questions about it, he said.

"I quit because I didn't want to perpetuate misleading facts," said Schwab, 38, who was hired in 2015 and resigned last week. "I asked them to change the information. I told them that the information was wrong, they asked me to deflect, and I didn't agree with that. Then I took some time and I quit."

Schwab said the statements about immigrants evading arrest, which were widely quoted in an array of media outlets, were misleading "because we were not ever going to be able to capture 100 percent of the target list" of roughly 1,000 undocumented immigrants in Northern California.

"I didn't feel like fabricating the truth to defend ourselves against (Schaaf's) actions was the way to go about it," he said. "We were never going to pick up that many people. To say that 100 percent are dangerous criminals on the street, or

that those people weren't picked up because of the misguided actions of the mayor, is just wrong."

ICE officials confirmed Schwab's resignation, saying Monday that he "recently announced his departure" from the office of public affairs, but they would not discuss specifics, citing the confidentiality of personnel matters.

Schaaf praised Schwab's action. "I commend Mr. Schwab for speaking the truth while under intense pressure to lie," she said. "Our democracy depends on public servants who act with integrity and hold transparency in the highest regard."

Asked about the disputed figures, an ICE spokeswoman in Washington, D.C., Jennifer Elzea, did not respond directly in an email. But she suggested that 800 immigrants had not evaded arrest because of Schaaf's warning.

She referred to a quote from the head of ICE, Thomas Homan, who on the third day of the operation said, "864 criminal aliens and public safety threats remain at large in the community, and I have to believe that some of them were able to elude us thanks to the mayor's irresponsible decision."

The ICE operation, called Keep Safe, began Feb. 25 and was intended to send a message to California leaders that they could not shield immigrants from federal law despite state and local sanctuary policies. ICE reported arresting 232 undocumented immigrants in regions from the Central Valley to the northern reaches of the state.

On the night of Feb. 24, Schaaf announced that the sweep was imminent, saying she had learned about the operation from confidential sources and felt compelled to alert the community. The Trump administration was furious, saying the warning harmed the operation and endangered ICE officers in the field.

But officials' statements about the consequences of the warning have shifted. After Homan said, "I have to believe that some of them were able to elude us," he went further, saying on Feb. 28, "There's 800 that we are unable to locate because of that warning, so that community is a lot less safe than it would have been."

Sessions, speaking in Sacramento on Wednesday, said he had learned from Homan that "ICE failed to make 800 arrests that they would have made if the mayor had not acted as she did. Those are 800 wanted aliens that are now at large in that community."

A day later, President Trump said ICE had been prepared to arrest "close to 1,000 people" before Schaaf's warning.

That same day, Homan said in an appearance on Fox News that "many criminal aliens were not apprehended because of that warning. I can't put a specific number on it."

Schwab said that as a public face of the government, he found himself in an untenable situation.

"It's the job of a public affairs officer to offer transparency for the agency you work for. I felt like we weren't doing that," he said. "I've never been in a situation when I've been asked to ignore the facts because it was more convenient. It was my first time being asked to do that."

ICE Spokesman In NorCal Says He Was Asked To Parrot 'Alternative Facts' About Libby Schaaf

KTVU-TV San Francisco, March 12, 2018

The communications director for the Northern California Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency quit, frustrated that he's been told to tell the public "alternative facts."

"I'm scared," James Schwab admitted to KTVU. "But I need to have my integrity."

Specifically, Schwab said that was told ICE's "Office of Public Affairs leadership" to parrot the Department of Homeland Security's account that an unspecified number of "criminals" got away, in part, because Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf warned of the pending ICE "Keep Safe" operation. The operation began on Feb. 25 and ended up netting 232 undocumented immigrants over the next several days across the northern part of the state.

Emails and calls to ICE headquarters and the Attorney General's Office, both in Washington, D.C., were not immediately returned. But Lori Haley, the western region communications director for ICE on Monday, told KTVU that Schwab had resigned "abruptly."

On Feb. 27, Schwab sent a news release that stated in part, from Acting ICE Director Thomas D. Homan: "The Oakland mayor's decision to publicize her suspicions about ICE operations further increased that risk for my officers and alerted criminal aliens – making clear that this reckless decision was based on her political agenda with the very federal laws that ICE is sworn to uphold."

Homan continued: "Thanks to the dedicated and professional work of ICE deportation officers, we were able to remove many public safety threats from the streets of the Bay Area during the past few days. However, 864 criminal aliens and public safety threats remain at large in the community, and I have to believe that some of them were able to elude us thanks to the mayor's irresponsible decision. Unlike the politicians who attempt to undermine ICE's critical mission, our officers will continue to fulfill their sworn duty to protect public safety."

While Schwab said he may not agree with Schaaf on everything she did, he said the original ICE projections were to arrest far fewer than the 232 people agents took into custody. He added the agency never expected to arrest all the undocumented immigrants during the operation. And so, operation "Keep Safe" was more successful than the agency

had hoped, Schwab said. That despite the fact that President Donald Trump said that the agency would have netted "close to 1,000 people" had it not been for Schaaf.

When he told supervisors he was not comfortable perpetuating that narrative, Schwab said he was told by the Office of Public Affairs to repeat what was in the Feb. 27 news release and defer questions to the Department of Justice. He said he couldn't do that any more.

Schwab said he doesn't want to out any particular people in the agency but said he felt he had to make a statement by quitting to do the right thing in his mind.

He added when he took the job in August 2015 during the Obama administration, after having worked as a public affairs specialist for the U.S. Army Reserve in Mountain View and as a spokesman for the NASA Ames Research Center in Moffett Field for more than 15 years, he never could have imagined what he would be asked to do.

Schwab also made sure to point out that there are many individual ICE agents who are good, honest, hardworking people. They should not be blamed, Schwab said, as they are carrying out orders from the top.

And Schwab's resignation comes at a time when the federal government and the city of Oakland are in a heated war of words: The head of ICE and Attorney General Jeff Sessions have both accused Schaaf of acting like a gang lookout, warning the bad guys that police are coming to give them time to run away.

Schaaf has remained steadfast in her decision to alert the community about the raid. She reiterated that point last week with KTVU, saying that she deeply respects police, and "never gave any specific locations that could have endangered law enforcement." She added: "How can it be illegal to tell people what their rights are?"

Schwab took the job one month after Kate Steinle was killed in San Francisco by Jose Inez Garcia Zarate, an undocumented immigrant, and the ICE office was flooded with calls. He was the first person to ever head the communications strategy for the San Francisco office, which covers the Northern California and Northern Nevada region.

ICE Spokesman Resigns, Citing 'false' Statements By Top Federal Officials About Calif. Immigrant Arrests

By Meagan Flynn

Washington Post, March 13, 2018

The San Francisco spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has resigned over what he described as "false" and "misleading" statements made by top-ranking officials, including Attorney General Jeff Sessions and ICE Acting Director Thomas D. Homan.

The now-former spokesman, James Schwab, told news outlets late Monday that his resignation stemmed from

statements by Homan and Sessions that potentially hundreds of "criminal aliens" evaded ICE during a Northern California raid in February because Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf warned the immigrant community in advance.

Schwab said he pushed back on that characterization — but said ICE instructed him to "deflect" questions from the press.

"I quit because I didn't want to perpetuate misleading facts," he told the San Francisco Chronicle, which broke the story. "I asked them to change the information. I told them that the information was wrong, they asked me to deflect, and I didn't agree with that. Then I took some time and I quit."

ICE officials and Sessions — and at one point President Trump — criticized Schaaf for tipping off immigrants about the raid, which netted 232 suspected undocumented immigrants.

Homan said in a statement that "864 criminal aliens and public safety threats remain at large in the community, and I have to believe that some of them were able to elude us thanks to the mayor's irresponsible decision. Unlike the politicians who attempt to undermine ICE's critical mission, our officers will continue to fulfill their sworn duty to protect public safety."

And just last week, in Sacramento, Sessions said, "Those are 800 wanted criminals that are now at large in that community — 800 wanted criminals that ICE will now have to pursue with more difficulty in more dangerous situations, all because of one mayor's irresponsible action."

Schwab, however, said that both the number of potential arrests and the blame heaped on Schaaf by officials was wrong.

As he told the Chronicle, "I didn't feel like fabricating the truth to defend ourselves against her actions was the way to go about it. We were never going to pick up that many people. To say that 100 percent are dangerous criminals on the street, or that those people weren't picked up because of the misguided actions of the mayor, is just wrong."

"I just couldn't bear the burden — continuing on as a representative of the agency and charged with upholding integrity, knowing that information was false," he told CNN.

ICE could not immediately be reached for comment by The Post regarding Schwab's assertions that it had released false and misleading information. The Chronicle quoted unnamed ICE officials confirming Schwab's resignation but declining to discuss specifics, citing confidentiality for personnel matters. A Justice Department spokesperson could not immediately be reached.

According to ICE, of the 232 people picked up in the raid, 115, or roughly half, had felonies or misdemeanors on their records.

When Schwab insisted on setting the record straight and correcting the idea that hundreds of dangerous criminals

got away, he said ICE officials told him to direct reporters to statements ICE or Homan had already made.

"It's the job of a public affairs officer to offer transparency for the agency you work for," he told the Chronicle. "I felt like we weren't doing that. I've never been in a situation when I've been asked to ignore the facts because it was more convenient."

San Francisco Jail Let ICE Interview Inmate In Breach Of Sanctuary Policy, State Law

San Francisco Chronicle, March 13, 2018

The San Francisco Sheriff's Department allowed federal immigration officers into one of its jails to interview an inmate, a violation of jail policy and California sanctuary law, department officials said Monday.

Department policy broadly restricts cooperation with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, forbidding most communication with the agency and barring access to inmates, some of whom the government would like to detain for potential deportation.

The goal of sanctuary policies, which conservatives and the Trump administration have called dangerous, is to convince undocumented immigrants that they can engage with local authorities without fear that their legal status will be an issue.

But Thursday, sheriff's officials said, a pair of ICE officers entered separate San Francisco jails, requested to speak with two inmates, and were given access to interview rooms. While one inmate declined to speak with ICE, another inmate participated in the interview.

The inmate who was interviewed had been informed by the Sheriff's Department that ICE was seeking to detain him upon his release from jail. But San Francisco's citywide sanctuary ordinance does not allow inmates to be turned over to ICE in most cases.

In an interview Monday, Sheriff Vicki Hennessy said the department's policy had been in place before her 2015 election. She said it appeared ICE was "testing our defenses and they found some weak points." The incident is under investigation, she said.

"My staff made a mistake and I have to hold myself accountable," she said. "I apologize on behalf of the department. I feel embarrassed by it. I've taken steps to make sure it never happens again."

It's not clear what was discussed in the interview, and the inmate was not identified. The incident came one week after a four-day ICE sweep in Northern California, which netted 232 arrests and was designed to counter sanctuary laws.

The interview appeared to be a violation of California's Truth Act, which was signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2016,

said Pratheepan Gulasekaram, a professor and immigration expert at Santa Clara University School of Law.

The law mandates that before any interview between ICE and a county jail inmate, a consent form be provided describing the reasoning for the interview, that the interview is voluntary and that an attorney can be present.

"Either what's happened here is a deliberate opposition to San Francisco's non-cooperation policy by sheriff's deputies, or ignorance of that policy," he said, "and ICE doing what it does, which is to attempt to take advantage of that ignorance."

The Sheriff's Department did not provide the inmate with a consent form, officials said, because its policy doesn't allow ICE officers to have access at all.

After learning of the interview, Hennessy reiterated the policy to leaders in the jail, and issued a department-wide bulletin on the matter, said Nancy Crowley, a department spokeswoman.

"Sheriff's Department watch commanders are communicating this directive at muster at each of three daily shifts for one week," Crowley said.

Jeff Adachi, the city's public defender, said the man who was interviewed was a client of his office. He said the officers asked the man questions about his background and nationality and tried to get him to sign a form.

The office is trying to figure out what the form was and determine whether the inmate signed it, Adachi said. He said the inmate does not read English or Spanish.

"How sheriff's deputies are not aware of our sanctuary policies is quite frankly beyond me," Adachi said.

He said he informed Hennessy of the visit last week and was assured that the problem would be addressed.

ICE sent 99 requests for San Francisco to hold or turn over undocumented inmates in 2016, and 469 requests in 2017, city records show. Already in 2018, the city has received 212 such requests. None has been honored.

The ICE officers returned to a San Francisco jail on Monday and requested another inmate interview, Crowley said, but they were denied access after being informed of the department's policy.

"That's a good sign," Hennessy said.

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US Agents Told About Mexican Immigrant After He Left Jail

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

DENVER (AP) — The Denver Sheriff's Department has said it is investigating why immigration authorities weren't notified of the release of a jail inmate until about an hour after he had already left.

Ivan Zamarripa-Castaneda of Mexico, 26, is charged with vehicular homicide in a hit-and-run crash that killed truck driver John Anderson, 57, on Interstate 70 on March 3. He was released from Denver's jail at 5:28 p.m. Saturday after posting \$25,000 bond but U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was not notified until 6:33 p.m., the sheriff's department said.

"This is unacceptable and the Sheriff has ordered an immediate internal review to determine why established notification processes did not take place before Zamarripa-Castaneda was released," the department said Sunday in a statement.

In a statement, Immigration and Customs Enforcement Denver Field Office Director Jeffrey D. Lynch said the agency was notified Saturday that Zamarripa-Castaneda would be released at an unspecified time.

He said deportation officers arrived at the jail less than two hours later to take him into custody and discovered he had already been released. The agency now considers Zamarripa-Castaneda an "immigration fugitive."

Lynch said that the agency was working with the sheriff's department to determine what happened to try to prevent similar situations from happening again.

"As law enforcement professionals, we should all have the same ultimate goal in mind — to protect the public by combating criminals. ICE helps fulfill that role by removing criminal aliens from the streets, and from the United States," he said.

The incident happened a year after U.S. Attorney Jeff Sessions criticized Denver's jail for giving immigration officials 25 minutes' notice before releasing an auto theft suspect, Ever Valles, they had expressed an interest in. He was involved in a fatal robbery several months later and was sentenced Friday to 29 years in prison.

The immigration agency requests jails hold inmates that agents are interested in until they can arrive to detain them.

But Denver and other jurisdictions have said they cannot legally hold inmates after they post bond unless immigration agents obtain arrest warrants.

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Denver Sheriff Admits Mistake In Releasing ICE Fugitive Charged With I-70 Vehicular Homicide

By Kirk Mitchell

Denver Post, March 12, 2018

Ivan Zamarripa Castaneda

The Denver Sheriff Department has admitted that it botched the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

notification process when it released a Mexican man charged with vehicular homicide.

In a statement Monday, Sheriff Patrick Firman said he is investigating why deputies failed to notify ICE officials in advance that Ivan Zamarripa-Castaneda, 26, was being released from the Downtown Detention Center. Zamarripa left the jail after posting a \$25,000 bond on a vehicular homicide – DUI and leaving the scene of an accident charges.

Deputies did not notify ICE of Zamarripa-Castaneda's pending release until an hour after the suspect had left the jail. ICE had placed a civil immigration detainer hold on Zamarripa-Castaneda because he is living illegally in the United States.

"This is unacceptable and the sheriff has ordered an immediate internal review to determine why established notification processes did not take place before Zamarripa-Castaneda was released," the sheriff's statement said.

The sheriff's department's notification process, as well as the city's overall immigration policies, have been criticized by some, including U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who has labeled Denver as a sanctuary city. And it is not the first time the jail's release of a person living in the country illegally has become a highly publicized controversy.

Zamarripa-Castaneda was involved in a fiery, fatal hit-and-run car crash on March 3 on I-70. On Monday, the Denver Coroner's office identified the victim as 57-year-old John Anderson, who was driving a tractor-trailer eastbound on I-70 near the I-25 interchange. The cause and manner of death were pending investigation.

Denver police officers arrested Zamarripa-Castaneda the next day after he ran from the freeway after causing the fatal collision. When police interviewed Zamarripa-Castaneda, his eyes were watery, his speech was slurred and his breath had a moderate odor of alcohol, according to an incident report.

Two days after his arrest, ICE officials placed a detainer on Zamarripa-Castaneda.

On Saturday, Denver jail officials notified ICE that he would be released at an unspecified time, Rusnok said. But two hours later when ICE officers arrived at the jail to pick up Zamarripa-Castaneda and transfer him to a federal detention facility, Denver jail officials already had released him, Rusnok said.

The sheriff's department said it released Zamarripa-Castaneda at 5:28 p.m. Saturday but did not notify ICE until 6:33 p.m. That is a violation of the department's policy to send ICE advance notification of an inmate's release — via fax — when ICE has requested it.

In a statement, Jeffery D. Lynch, director of the ICE office in Denver, said his office is coordinating with the sheriff's department to identify communication issues that occurred in the case.

"As law enforcement professionals, we should all have the same ultimate goal in mind — to protect the public by combating criminals," Lynch's statement said. "ICE helps fulfill that role by removing criminal aliens from the streets and from the United States."

Zamarripa-Castaneda is considered an immigration fugitive, Lynch said.

The sheriff's department's policy says it will send ICE notification of inmate's release as soon as a date and time are available. However, the sheriff's department will not hold someone on a civil immigration detainer beyond their scheduled release even though ICE asks jails to hold someone for up to 48 hours.

The sheriff's department will keep someone in custody as long as necessary when ICE has a criminal arrest warrant.

That policy has been in place for years, but it recently was written into law when Denver City Council approved an immigration ordinance.

This is not the first time tension has erupted between ICE and the Denver sheriff over an inmate's release.

Last year, the city was criticized after Ever Valles was charged with murder in the robbery and shooting death of a 32-year-old Tim Cruz at a light rail station. Valles had been arrested on Oct. 20, 2016 and released from the downtown jail on Dec. 20, 2016 without ICE notification.

Valles then was involved in the robbery and murder less than two months later in February 2017.

In October 2016, Norlan Estrada-Reyes killed 28-year-old Karina Pulec, a young Denver lawyer, in a hit-and-run traffic accident. Estrada-Reyes had been deported in 2007, but he returned to the U.S. illegally.

He was arrested in 2013 and 2014 in Denver, but released both times before ICE could pick him up.

Both cases became talking points during Denver's immigration policy discussions.

Valles and Estrada-Reyes are serving prison sentences for their Denver crimes. Typically, ICE will not deport a person in their custody until criminal proceedings and sentences are complete.

Denver Sheriff Orders Internal Investigation After Undocumented Immigrant Wanted By ICE Posts Bond

KDVR-TV Denver, March 12, 2018

DENVER – The Denver sheriff is calling for an internal investigation of the department after an undocumented immigrant wanted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement bonded out of jail.

Ivan Zamarripa-Castaneda, 26, has been charged with vehicular homicide after a fiery crash on March 3.

ICE requested a notification if Zamarripa-Castaneda was going to be released. Zamarripa-Castaneda bonded out at 5:28 p.m. Saturday, but ICE was notified until 6:33 p.m.

"This is unacceptable and the sheriff has ordered an immediate internal review to determine why established notification processes did not take place before Zamarripa-Castaneda was released," the sheriff's department said in a statement.

Zamarripa-Castaneda is from Mexico and was involved in a crash on Interstate 70 just before midnight on March 3.

The crash killed a 57-year-old semitruck driver and shut down the interstate for several hours.

The Denver Police Department said Zamarripa-Castaneda fled the scene of the crash and that he was driving drunk. He was arrested the next day at his home in Denver.

ICE officials placed a detainer hold on him last week.

Zamarripa-Castaneda posted the \$25,000 bond and the sheriff's department said it notified ICE of the pending release, but it did not give a time.

When ICE agents arrived at the detention center, Zamarripa-Castaneda was already gone.

ICE called Zamarripa-Castaneda an immigration fugitive and said, "As law enforcement professionals, we should all have the same ultimate goal in mind – to protect the public by combating criminals."

Zamarripa-Castaneda has been charged with one count of vehicular homicide-DUI and one count of leaving the scene of an accident resulting in death.

He appeared in court on Friday morning for a second advisement before making bail.

A preliminary hearing is scheduled for April 2.

Feds Prosecuting Illegal Immigrants For Enticing Relatives To U.S.

By Stephen Dinan

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

An illegal immigrant from Guatemala was sentenced to seven months in jail late last month for paying human smugglers to bring his 16-year-old brother-in-law into the U.S., in what officials say is one of the first cases to punish a relative for enticing a family member to make the dangerous trek north.

Miguel Pacheco-Lopez admitted he paid \$6,100 to "coyotes," as the smugglers are called, to bring his wife's brother into the U.S. last year. He expected the teen — identified in court documents by the initials S.M. — to pay the majority of the money back at 8 percent interest.

The prosecution was part of a groundbreaking strategy to try to slow the stream of unaccompanied alien children by going after the people they are trying to join in the U.S.

SEE ALSO: Sanctuary cities putting money in hands of cartels, Trump administration says

"This criminal jeopardized his own family members by paying human smugglers," said James C. Spero, special agent in charge at the Tampa office of homeland security investigations. "He endangered a child's life with a dangerous and unlawful journey into the United States, and now he will be held accountable."

Pursuing people who are paying to have their family members smuggled to the U.S. has always been among the trickiest parts of the immigration debate.

Immigrant rights activists say they are often trying to help relatives escape terrible conditions back home and should be viewed as part of a humanitarian mission.

But analysts who have pushed for stiffer policies toward illegal immigration cheered the conviction and sentencing.

"It's long overdue, and it's something that they have to do to deter people from paying smugglers," said Jessica Vaughan, policy studies director at the Center for Immigration Studies. "It's dangerous for the kids, not to mention that it enriches a criminal enterprise."

She said the courts have tied the administration's hands on many other areas of enforcement, such as the ability to detain and quickly deport illegal immigrant children, so some other deterrent was needed.

President Trump teased the policy in his initial immigration executive orders. As homeland security secretary, John F. Kelly elaborated on the plan in a Feb. 20, 2017, implementation memo. He said the parents were putting their children through unimaginable hardship on the journey north.

Beatings, killings and rape are reportedly common — so much so that some teen girls preparing to make the journey would take birth control to avoid becoming pregnant from rape along the way.

"Regardless of the desires for family reunification, or conditions in other countries, the smuggling or trafficking of alien children is intolerable," Mr. Kelly wrote in the memo.

He ordered his agencies to consider deporting or even criminally charging those who paid the children's way.

Bryan Johnson, an immigration lawyer who penned a letter to Mr. Kelly last year asking him to drop the policy, said he had heard of no other conviction like Pacheco-Lopez.

"DHS is using this one conviction in hopes that it deters future unaccompanied minors from entering USA. Same philosophy as under Obama but with more extreme tactics," Mr. Johnson told *The Washington Times*. "And, just as in Obama administration, this deterrence-at-all-costs policy may have temporary effects, but in long term it will do little to nothing to stop unaccompanied minors from coming so long as the conditions there — extreme violence and poverty — persist."

A spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement declined to provide more details about the case, but Pacheco-Lopez turned out to be the thread that unraveled a much bigger illegal immigration operation.

Court documents show that when agents went to first talk to Pacheco-Lopez, the address they were given in Jacksonville turned out to have at least a half-dozen other illegal immigrants living there and working at a Japanese steakhouse along with Pacheco-Lopez.

The owners of Fujiyama Steakhouse and Sushi Lounge, a husband and wife from China, were paying illegal immigrants low wages but letting them live in the crowded house. They were convicted and sentenced to probation.

The case illustrated some of the other difficulties presented by the surge of illegal immigrants.

Pacheco-Lopez's native language is K'iche', which is Mayan. Authorities had to find qualified K'iche' interpreters. Those interpreters didn't speak English well, so they translated Pacheco-Lopez's words into Spanish. ICE officers who were fluent in English and Spanish did the final translation into English.

Agents and prosecutors said they weren't surprised that just one person has been convicted of paying for smuggling.

One immigration agent said federal officers have a tough time getting prosecutors to take the cases. The agent said it can be difficult to prove the trail of cash and that prosecutors may be reluctant to take on cases in which the illegal immigrants may seem sympathetic.

The agent said the Florida case might have been easier to make because Pacheco-Lopez was charging his brother interest, suggesting a business transaction more than a family unification effort.

Parents' and other family members' involvement in smuggling has been a sore spot for authorities for years.

In one groundbreaking 2013 opinion, U.S. District Judge Andrew S. Hanen blasted the Obama administration for complicity in human smuggling. He said that by delivering illegal immigrant children to their parents — usually also in the U.S. illegally — the government was effectively "completing the criminal mission" of the smugglers.

He was reviewing a case in which an illegal immigrant mother living in Virginia paid for her daughter to be smuggled into the country. The woman attempting the smuggling was caught after using one of her daughters' birth certificates for the illegal immigrant girl.

But Homeland Security delivered the girl to her mother anyway. Judge Hanen said he was stunned that Homeland Security didn't arrest or even try to deport the mother.

"The DHS, instead of enforcing our border security laws, actually assisted the criminal conspiracy in achieving its illegal goals," he wrote.

Judge Hanen went on to become the first to invalidate the 2014 Deferred Action for the Parents of Americans policy

that Mr. Obama tried to create. DAPA would have expanded the 2012 DACA deportation amnesty to include parents of U.S. citizens, which would have covered millions of illegal immigrants.

'She Is Setting Aside Her Oath Of Office'

Washington Examiner, March 13, 2018

Vice President Mike Pence called the mayor of Oakland, Calif., "disgraceful" Monday following her recent warnings to illegal immigrants that federal immigration raids would be taking place in the San Francisco Bay Area.

"Look, the mayor's actions are disgraceful on a couple of levels. She is setting aside her oath of office to uphold the law of the land and the rule of law," Pence told Sean Hannity during his Fox News show Monday evening.

"Secondly, I spoke to the attorney general about this ... the majority of the individuals targeted by I.C.E. had a criminal record. So for the mayor of Oakland to warn them in advance of the actions by I.C.E. personnel put the law enforcement officers at risk," the vice president added.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions last week also criticized Mayor Libby Schaaf for "endangering" the lives of law enforcement officers.

"Her actions support those who flout our laws and boldly validate the illegality," Sessions said, adding, "How dare you. How dare you needlessly endanger the lives of law enforcement just to promote your radical open-borders agenda."

Schaaf, Oakland's Democratic mayor since 2015, has been under fire since she sent out a warning in February that federal immigration raids were imminent in Northern California.

Pence: Oakland Mayor Warning About Immigration Raids Is 'Unacceptable'

By Julia Manchester

The Hill, March 12, 2018

Vice President Pence slammed Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf (D) on Monday, saying her actions warning residents of upcoming Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids were "utterly unacceptable."

"The mayor's actions are disgraceful on a couple levels. Number one, she's setting aside her oath of office to uphold the laws of the land, the rule of law," Pence told Sean Hannity on Fox News.

"I spoke to the attorney general about this. The majority of individuals who are being targeted by immigration and customs enforcement had a criminal record. So for the mayor of Oakland to warn them in advance of actions by ICE personnel actually put those law enforcement officers at risk; that's just utterly unacceptable," he said.

President Trump criticized Schaaf at a Cabinet meeting last week, calling her a "disgrace."

"What the mayor of Oakland did the other day was a disgrace. Where they had close to a thousand people, ready to be gotten, ready to be taken off the streets. ... The mayor of Oakland went out, and she went out and warned them all: scatter," Trump said.

"So instead of taking in a thousand, they took in a fraction of that, about 150," he continued. "It's certainly something we're looking at with respect to her, individually."

Schaaf warned residents of upcoming raids in the Bay Area last month.

The mayor also drew the ire of Attorney General Jeff Sessions last week, who called her out in remarks announcing a lawsuit against California for its "sanctuary city" laws.

"How dare you needlessly endanger the lives of our law enforcement officers to promote a radical open borders agenda," Sessions said.

Schaaf fired back in a speech last week.

"How dare you vilify members of our community by trying to frighten the American public into thinking all undocumented residents are dangerous criminals," she said.

San Diego Area ICE Arrests Of Noncriminal Immigrants Led Nation From October To December

By Kate Morrissey

Los Angeles Times, March 12, 2018

More people with no criminal history were arrested by San Diego's Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the first quarter of fiscal 2018 than anywhere else in the country.

The San Diego field office for ICE, which covers San Diego and Imperial counties, was the only field office in the country where the majority of arrests — at about 72% — were of "noncriminals," according to data from the agency.

Between October and December, ICE officers here arrested 1,622 people without criminal records, and 637 people with criminal records.

The Atlanta field office, which covers three states — Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina — had the second highest number of noncriminal arrests at 1,592. That was about 41% of the arrests for that field office, where 2,343 people with criminal records were arrested by ICE.

"ICE arrests of noncriminals in the San Diego/Imperial counties reflect trends involving illegal immigration activity at the local borders, apprehensions made during routine fugitive operations and individuals encountered at the local jails," said Lauren Mack, a spokeswoman for ICE.

For other field offices along the border, the highest percentage of noncriminal arrests was 43% in Phoenix, where ICE took 733 people with no criminal histories into custody.

Some attorneys speculated that ICE was pushing to make more arrests before SB 54, a California bill limiting local police cooperation with federal immigration officials, took effect in January.

Other field offices in California did not reflect San Diego's trend. In Los Angeles, ICE officers arrested 357 noncriminals, which was about 16% of the field office's arrests. In San Francisco, officers arrested 373, which was about 22% of the field office's arrests.

Within days of taking office, President Trump expanded the agency's enforcement priorities from those with serious criminal convictions to a broader list of people including those who had any criminal conviction, who had been charged but not convicted, who had done anything that could be charged as a crime, or who had already been ordered deported.

According to a recent Pew Research Center analysis, noncriminal arrests increased 49% in San Diego in fiscal 2017. The Atlanta and Philadelphia field offices tied for the largest increase at 323%.

As stories about families whose loved ones were targeted have been repeatedly spotlighted by media across the country and data from Trump's first year in office showed an uptick in noncriminal arrests, ICE has insisted that it focuses on criminals but that anyone without authorization to be in the U.S. could end up arrested.

"While ICE continues to prioritize its enforcement resources to focus on individuals who pose a threat to national security, public safety and border security, the agency's acting director has made it clear that ICE will not exempt classes or categories of removable aliens from potential enforcement," Mack told the San Diego Union-Tribune on multiple occasions. "All of those in violation of our nation's immigration laws may be subject to arrest, detention and, if found removable, he or she will be removed from the United States."

Ginger Jacobs, an immigration attorney in San Diego, said that in her time practicing, she's noticed that the San Diego field office always works hard to follow orders from headquarters.

"My perception as an attorney is that our local ICE office is very responsive to policy being set in Washington, D.C.," Jacobs said.

Jacobs who's been practicing since George W. Bush's administration, said that during that time and into the first part of the Obama administration, the main reasons that people would end up being arrested by immigration officials were checkpoints and interactions with local law enforcement.

Collateral arrests happened, she said, but not frequently.

Beginning in 2011, she said, incremental changes in policy under former President Obama brought about more targeted enforcement.

Those changes have reversed under Trump, she said, and arrests happen in circumstances that would've been rare even under Bush.

"It turned into a zero tolerance policy," Jacobs said. "It's like Bush on steroids."

She has clients who have no criminal history and no prior deportation orders who have been targeted at their homes, she said.

"Going to somebody's house just because they have immigration violations, I've never seen that before," Jacobs said.

Edward Orendain, an immigration attorney in Chula Vista, said he's not surprised by the numbers from ICE's San Diego field office. He noticed that beginning in September or October, any type of contact with law enforcement could land an unauthorized immigrant in ICE detention even if there were no criminal charges.

One of his clients called the police because his wife had hit him. The wife told the responding officers that her husband had not hit her, that she'd slapped him. The officers arrested the man but did not charge him with anything. He ended up in ICE custody.

"We've been seeing a lot of that," Orendain said, noting that after January it had happened less frequently because of SB 54.

Orendain has also seen an uptick in people who were arrested when ICE was looking for someone else in their home or apartment complex, known as "collateral arrests."

Tammy Lin, who chairs the San Diego chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Assn., said cases have come in because people got pulled over for taillight issues or other minor traffic infractions.

"They're picking the easy targets," Lin said.

None of the attorneys' clients was willing to be interviewed for this story because of fear that it might negatively affect their immigration cases.

Morrissey writes for the San Diego Union-Tribune

Probation Terminated After Former Aurora Priest Removed To Colombia

By Hannah Leone

Aurora (IL) Beacon-News, March 12, 2018

A former Aurora priest who avoided a jury trial on child sex abuse charges through a misdemeanor plea deal is back in Colombia, and his probation in Kane County has been terminated.

Alfredo Pedraza Arias, 51, lost his temporary religious worker visa after he was charged with sexually abusing two girls at Sacred Heart Church in Aurora and at one of the girls' homes between 2012 and 2014. In June 2017, a federal immigration judge ordered Arias removed from the United States, a decision the priest waived his right to appeal.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement deportation officers arrested Arias Feb. 10 at the Kane County jail in St. Charles after he completed his criminal sentence, ICE spokeswoman Nicole Alberico said in an email. On Feb. 26, ICE deportation officers executed the removal order and removed Arias to Colombia, Alberico said.

On Friday, an order closed the Kane County criminal case, terminating his probation.

As trial was approaching, Arias, who had previously pleaded not guilty to a five-count felony indictment, pleaded guilty to battery, a class A misdemeanor. He agreed to a sentence of 205 days in county jail with credit for time served, and was released as scheduled Feb. 10.

The deal explicitly did not require Arias to register as a sex offender, though it did put him on sex offender probation for 24 months and stipulated he'd have to comply with a sex offender evaluation and treatment, if so ordered. He was also to pay \$410 in costs and have no contact with either victim or their immediate family members.

Kane County Circuit Judge Linda Abrahamson accepted the plea.

Kane County State's Attorney Joe McMahon previously referenced the pending deportation when addressing the plea agreement.

Arias' attorney, David Camic, has said the plea is supported by the facts, maintaining that Arias didn't commit a criminal sex offense.

When the judge raised Arias bail in an attempt to keep him in custody and away from ICE, Camic said parishioners came up with thousands of dollars to free him again.

Sacred Heart Rev. Msgr. Arquimedes Vallejo said his knowledge of the case came from television and the papers, and that he trusted in the courts and the justice system.

Vallejo said he couldn't say much, but he knew a lot of people at the church said they missed Arias. He said he had not talked to the families of the priest's accusers.

"Everyone has the right to ... express their feelings," Vallejo said.

Vallejo said he was not aware of any effort to bring Arias back to the U.S.

Military Times' Sailor Of The Year's Wife Reveals She Fears Deportation

By Tara Copp

Military Times, March 11, 2018

Last July, inside a crowded cocktail tent, Navy Petty Officer First Class Justin Sullivan stood under a stage light in his dress whites. Politicians and defense leaders pushed through the crowd to shake his hand.

By his side was his wife, Loretto Dalmazzo Sullivan. She smiled despite the heat, their baby strapped to her chest.

Justin Sullivan, the Navy Times' 2017 Sailor of the Year, was being honored for his service as a radio operator during two combat tours in Afghanistan and hundreds of hours of volunteer work at home.

Loretto kept one eye on their toddler daughter while their infant son pulled on her long dark hair. She wanted to take the opportunity to say something about those Afghanistan deployments, but she didn't. This was Justin's moment.

Now, however, "we are at a point where people need to hear," Loretto, 32, told Military Times Thursday.

While Justin, 28, was deployed in 2012 and 2013, Loretto lived under intense stress, fearing their family would be split apart by immigration authorities. She is undocumented.

"It's this constant fear that someone is going to show up at your door and take you away," she said in a phone interview from Florida, where the family is currently based.

The family started her immigration paperwork after Justin and Loretto married, but Loretto was denied because she had previously claimed to be a U.S. citizen on a restaurant job application.

Instead, as Justin was set to deploy again, U.S. immigration officials sent Loretto a letter urging her to voluntarily depart the country.

While he was away, Justin would worry and press Loretto. Don't speed. Make sure the blinker lights and headlights are working on the car.

"One blinker light out on her car could be her ticket out," he said.

"Deploying in Afghanistan has its own stressors," he said. "Every morning going to work, it's just another thing that's on my mind. 'Is today the day they are coming?'"

In 2014, Loretto qualified for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, protection, which grants her legal status here as long as the program, which is under threat of being cancelled, is continued.

She is one of a dozen military spouses, active-duty service members, veterans or their attorneys who have spoken to Military Times since the news organization reported the story of the looming deportation of the wife of a 7th Special Forces Group veteran, Army Sgt. 1st Class Bob Crawford.

The story, and DHS's decision to drop deportation proceedings after the story published, touched a nerve. Now, more military families are looking for answers.

"We are kind of hopeless," said another active-duty sailor, a California-based 35-year-old chief petty officer who has served on the cruiser Lake Champlain, destroyer Chafee and now-decommissioned attack submarine Albuquerque.

He asked not to be identified and said he is contemplating moving his family to Mexico because his wife faces deportation. Like the others who spoke to Military

Times, his wife's vulnerability "is always on your mind when you get deployed."

Multiple families affected

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has already said that some active-duty and National Guard members, reservists and honorably discharged veterans are "protected" from deportation as the administration of President Donald Trump has taken a harder line on immigration.

The families want to know: What about the spouses and kids?

"Who knows how many of us are out there, both inside and outside the U.S.," said a retired Air Force C-141 pilot who served as an instructor pilot in Iraq in 2009 and 2010.

He and his wife and their two toddler-age daughters now live full-time in the Middle East because his wife, who is Mexican and entered the country illegally, was instructed by DHS to voluntarily leave.

"I continue to this day as a DoD contract pilot, training international pilots in the Middle East," the 20-year Air Force veteran said via email. "Our hopes, like many other veterans who are outside the U.S. for the same reason, is that we can come home and bring our family home one day."

Right now, though, it doesn't look good, he said.

"We're considering Canada, where she was recently granted a visa when I finish my tour here in the Middle East," he said. "We're just tired of all the denials and going through the process and spending money on a lost cause, it seems."

Each case is different and complex; the affected spouses crossed illegally into the U.S. for various reasons, often to escape violence or hardship. They face deportation for different reasons, too. Some missed a hearing, some falsely said they were U.S. citizens to cross into the U.S. or to obtain work.

At some point, they met their significant others and became the backbone of the military families so often lauded by the service chiefs, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Joe Dunford, Mattis, and even President Trump.

"I want every military family in this country to know that our administration is at your service. We stand with you 100 percent. We will protect those who protect us. And we will never, ever let you down," Trump said in February 2017 to troops at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida.

Vice President Mike Pence, while still in Congress as a representative from Indiana, issued his own support for undocumented military spouses in 2010.

He co-authored a letter with colleagues urging DHS to use all means at its disposal to help the families obtain legal status, including a program called Parole in Place, or PIP, which would allow spouses who crossed illegally to stay.

'They are not criminals'

But the PIP has been effectively frozen, the military families and their attorneys said, since Trump's January 2017 executive order directing immigration authorities "to employ

all lawful means to enforce the immigration laws of the United States."

Even though the order specified going after immigrants who have committed crimes since coming to the country, it's had a blanket impact on the military community's undocumented dependents, too.

"The concerns I have for [my clients] are the concerns I have for so many," said attorney David Funke, who is representing former Army Spc. Charles Shreve, 40, who joined the military in 2009 and deployed to Afghanistan with the 307th Expeditionary Signal Battalion in 2010. Shreve's wife, 37-year-old Claudia, left the U.S. in 2017 after being given the option to depart voluntarily, or be deported.

"They support themselves, they have family, they are not criminals, but all that goes out the window" under the tighter enforcement, Funke said. Besides the Shreves, he currently has two other military families he is representing in deportation cases.

There are at least three bills under consideration in Congress that could help military spouses, dependents and even veterans themselves who have been deported or face a future deportation.

The first is H.R. 1036, the "American Families United Act," sponsored by Rep. Beto O'Rourke, D-Texas, which would enable immigration enforcement on a case-by-case basis to allow military spouses, dependents and other categories of immigrants to remain in the U.S.

The second is "Adoptee Citizenship Act of 2018," sponsored by Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., and Sen. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, which would ease some of the immigration restrictions for international adoptees.

The third is H.R. 3429, "Repatriate Our Patriots Act," sponsored by Rep. Vicente Gonzalez, D-Texas, Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, and O'Rourke. That bill would allow certain honorably discharged veterans who have been deported to come home.

Neither House bill has been granted a committee hearing in Congress, and the Senate bill was just reintroduced this week after it did not gain traction last session. Instead, individual congressional offices are lobbying for individual families in jeopardy to see if there's a chance for relief.

After Military Times wrote about the case of Alejandra Juarez, the wife of a Marine veteran in Florida who is set to be deported in April, the office of Rep. Darren Soto, D-Fla., reached out to DHS on her behalf. That case is still pending.

"These are loved ones of our service members, and they deserve some kind of special attention," Gonzalez said. "Anything that has to do with a veteran should be looked at with special eyes."

There's not a good count of how many military families are affected by the tougher immigration enforcement.

Gonzalez, however, said he's heard from deported veterans in 38 different countries.

"I know we are not the only ones who have been through this, and there will continue to be more," Shreve said. "I just pray our leadership will find a better way for all of us and our families."

In the days since the story broke about former Army Sgt. 1st Class Bob Crawford, readers have questioned why service members would choose to marry someone who was undocumented. Several of the service members and veterans had the same response.

"You can't help who you fall in love with," Justin Sullivan said.

Loretto "was the whole reason I got Navy Times' Sailor of the Year. She's the one who nominated me. She took all my evals and wrote it up for me. She's always been my rock."

"She's the person I come home to. Without that, I'd be lost."

Shreve's wife, Claudia, 37, was given an option; leave voluntarily or be deported.

"We ended up doing voluntary departure," Shreve said. "She had a deport order on her."

In March 2017, the couple was sent a letter to show up at the Louisville, Kentucky, immigration office to which they had reported regularly. But this time, the family got a "heads up," he said. "We weren't going to get another year in probation."

Claudia is now in Mexico; Charles Shreve drove most of the family's belongings there in January. Charles is staying in the U.S. through June with their two older kids so they can finish the school year. Then everyone will relocate to Chiapas, Mexico, their new home.

"We see this two ways," Shreve said. "One, it's unfortunate our family has to go through this. The situation did not end the way we wanted it to. But we look at it as a positive adventure for our children. They get to be multicultural."

Fighting to stay together

Deportation doesn't just affect military spouses. It involves their children, too.

"My greatest mistake in life is I didn't know that [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement] had their own age policy," said retired Army Lt. Col. Patrick Schreiber.

It was 2013. The Schreibers had taken in their niece as their own child. Patrick Schreiber was about to deploy to Afghanistan for a year as director of military intelligence for the 4th Infantry Division at RC-South.

So they decided to wait on formal adoption until he got home.

When he returned, the courts approved the adoption. The state of Kansas issued a birth certificate naming Schieber and his wife, Soo Jin, as the legal parents of Hyebin, who had just turned 17.

The military issued her an ID card and put her in DEERS. But the Department of Homeland Security issued Hyebin a rejection.

"They said there was no path to citizenship," Schreiber said.

In immigration policy, age 16 is the cutoff. It didn't matter that he was military; it continues not to matter that Hyebin, now 20, is a junior excelling in chemical engineering at the University of Kansas.

Schreiber met Soo Jin in South Korea while he was serving as a tank company executive officer and other positions with 1st Battalion, 72nd Armor Regiment in the late 1990s.

Soo Jin was her niece's confidant and main support. As Hyebin's home situation worsened, she asked to come live with them and study in the U.S. Then they legally adopted her. Hyebin's forced departure "would tear the family apart," Schreiber said.

Schreiber retired from the military in 2015 and continues to work for DoD as a contractor.

For now, Hyebin is in the U.S. on a student visa. Once she graduates, she will have to leave, Schreiber said.

"I spent 27 years in the Army, always putting the Army ahead" of family, he said.

He jumped with the 82nd Airborne Division into Panama during Operation Just Cause, served in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, deployed to Iraq from 2005 to 2006 and then again from 2007 to 2008, then was sent to Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011 and again from 2013 to 2014.

If Hyebin is sent back to South Korea, it's likely Schreiber and his wife will leave the U.S. to be with their daughter.

Former Army Spc. Brian Holovach, 53, first served from 1982 to 1986 with the 3rd Armored Division in Germany. After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he decided to serve again, re-enlisting in 2002 with the Army National Guard's 42nd Infantry Division.

In 2004, the 42nd was activated. Holovach, a network systems operator, spent 11 months deployed and served in a signal unit in Tikrit, Iraq.

"But mostly I was a commander's driver," Holovach said.

Their base got mortared almost every day, Holovach said. Once he got home, he had a hard time coping.

"Brian, you've changed," said wife, Esmeralda, 56, who he'd married in 2003.

Esmeralda was a petite beauty from Guatemala who'd stepped out of a big, red pickup truck at a Burger King.

"It was love at first sight," Holovach said.

When he got back, he said, he "was drinking a lot, she didn't like it. I was on a downward spiral. She lifted me up. I love her. There's nothing I wouldn't do for her."

They have tried to get her legal status adjusted for 15 years. Holovach said immigration officials recently informed his lawyer that the paperwork they previously filed cannot be located, and their next hearing is this October. If for some reason the judge is unavailable that day, their case "gets pushed another year," Holovach said. "That's the way the immigration court system works."

In the meantime, his wife's legal residency is still in jeopardy.

"I love my country. I love my family," Holovach said. "But this is one thing I've promised her. Nothing is going to happen to her. If she ever was, God forbid, brought into ICE, I would camp out at their doorstep with a sleeping bag and a tent. She would not do it alone."

U.S. Rep. Brady Vows To Submit Bill For Citizenship For Immigrant Family In N. Philly Church Sanctuary

By Alfred Lubrano

Philly (PA), March 12, 2018

Using rhetoric that rattled the stained-glass windows, supporters of the undocumented Mexican family living in sanctuary inside a North Philadelphia church loudly declared their commitment to the mother and her four children Monday, while decrying immigration officials, President Trump, and those who, they claim, have forgotten why the Statue of Liberty stands in New York Harbor.

All the while, Carmela Apolonio Hernandez, 36, under order with her children to be deported since December, stood smiling beneath black safety netting keeping the soaring stone ceiling of the crumbling 131-year-old Church of the Advocate from literally falling down on her.

"I want to thank this person whose name I can't pronounce," Hernandez said through a translator, referring to Democratic U.S. Rep. Bob Brady of Philadelphia, who had locked the diminutive woman in an embrace with his left arm, as though his sheer size and up-from-the-street Philly attitude would protect Hernandez from being dispatched to her home country, where her brother and two nephews were murdered.

"This lady is not fighting by herself," declared Brady, who said he will introduce a so-called private bill in Congress to bestow U.S. citizenship on Hernandez and her children — Edwin, 9; Yoselin, 11; Keyri, 13; and Fidel, 15. The children were at their schools during the event.

Brady acknowledged it would be "tough to pass" such a measure, but even proposing it "should get the attention of ICE," the federal office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

In a statement Monday afternoon, ICE officials described Hernandez as "an unlawfully present citizen of Mexico." They added that, "in an exercise of discretion, ICE has allowed Ms. Hernandez to remain free from custody while

finalizing her departure plans." Officials also said that "aliens who illegally enter the United States ... have violated our nation's laws and can pose a threat to national security and public safety."

While ICE guidelines deter agents from grabbing up people earmarked for deportation from "sensitive locations" such as churches, Brady addressed the gathered media, asking, "Wouldn't you want to be here if ICE came? [The family] would be taken out of here disgracefully. Can you imagine that visual?"

Also on hand, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, reminded Trump that he is descended from an immigrant family. "Immigrants came to the United States to escape oppression and find freedom," she said, adding, "The plea to ICE is to find your humanity."

City Council President Darrell L. Clarke mused aloud, "I don't know about the president, but the Statue of Liberty means something to me."

Representatives from the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, as well as the New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia, helped co-sponsor the event.

Hernandez expressed hope that she will some day be able to leave the sanctuary "and be free." With a nod toward the roughly three-dozen others living in sanctuary around the country, Hernandez added, "I'm not the only immigrant going through this. We should keep fighting."

The family came to the United States in August 2015, fleeing the violence of organized drug criminals who killed Hernandez's relatives, taxi drivers unable to pay extortion fees. Threatened and assaulted by the same men, Hernandez came north to San Diego, seeking asylum. After being detained and denied asylum, the five were sent to be in the care of a relative who's an American citizen in Pennsylvania. Hernandez eventually found her way to the church.

Because she said her children need to engage with others their age, Hernandez sent them to school. "My children have a right to go to school," she said in a previous interview.

Offering a window of what life is like in perpetual self-quarantine within the Episcopal church, Hernandez said she helps with the church's feeding program when she can.

Often, though, there's nothing for her to do while her children are in school. That's when, she said, the worries stir inside her head.

It's all she can do to squelch panic.

"They haven't come to take me and my children," she said. "Not yet."

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Kalamazoo Church Provides Sanctuary To Woman Facing Deportation

MLive (MI), March 12, 2018

KALAMAZOO, MI – Saheeda Perveen Nadeem held back tears Monday as she stood before members of Kalamazoo's First Congregational Church and thanked them for supporting her.

The church on West Michigan Avenue announced March 12, the same day 62-year-old Nadeem was supposed to be deported to Pakistan, that it will shelter her while she takes sanctuary from deportation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

Rev. Nathan Dannison, a senior pastor at the church, said the congregation decided it will not allow ICE to tear apart families.

"We do these things today not for political reasons, but because we are disciples of Jesus Christ," Dannison said. "We follow a higher law. We know what He expects of us and He has high expectations."

ICE did not immediately respond to a request for comment Monday.

Nadeem's 20-year-old son Samad, a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient, shared with the congregation the story of how his mother came to the United States 13 years ago in hopes of finding a better life for her children.

"For most of my cognizant life, Saheeda has worked harder than any individual should have to, to ensure a better life for me and my sister," Samad said.

With the help of DACA and The Kalamazoo Promise scholarship, Samad and his sister Lareb were able to attend college at Western Michigan University.

"Words cannot describe the joy I saw on my mother's face as she watched my sister Lareb walk down the stage at the graduation ceremony," Samad said.

In a sad turn of events, Lareb died the same summer she graduated, and she is buried in Kalamazoo. One of the only things that gives Saheeda joy is visiting Lareb's grave every morning, Samad said.

Despite the sadness in her life, Samad said his mother dedicates most of her time to giving as much as she can. She is a volunteer in the Muslim community and caregiver for orphans and refugees.

"The amount of affection these individuals have for my mother is comparable only to that of family," Samad said.

He said his mother has not lived in Pakistan in about 40 years, and Kalamazoo is her true home. She would have no one to care for her in Pakistan.

"This community has done amazing things for my family and I, and I would like to ask for your support one more time," Samad said.

Beth Luppe and her daughter Emily, who are members of the church, had not met Saheeda until recently, but came to support her.

"Last night I went to bed thinking, 'I don't understand how I'm living in a country right now where someone has to hide,'" Luppe said.

She said other people should try to imagine how they would feel if someone came to their door and told them they had to leave.

"I think if people could put themselves in someone else's shoes for a couple of minutes ...(there) aren't any words to describe it," Luppe said.

The church has an apartment Saheeda will be staying in and a GoFundMe page has been created to raise money to support her.

Dannison said the church does not expect ICE to come to the church, but if it does and attempts to get in it will be filmed and put on the internet.

"Immigration and Customs Enforcement, lately, have been more aggressive, targeting the most vulnerable members of our community," Dannison said. "I think that's why churches are stepping forward and saying that this is unethical, and this is absolutely not who we are as Americans."

He said there are steps people can take, including being an informed citizen and reaching out to legislators.

"Use your voice as a voice for folks who are marginalized in our community and who are under threat," Dannison said.

Saheeda said the support she has received has made her feel that she's not alone.

"I'm worried, but I feel safe here," she said.

ICE arrest of Michigan doctor evidence of 'broken immigration system'

Volunteers Provide Immigrants With Legal Assistance

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

NORTHAMPTON, Mass. (AP) — Sitting in a prison cell in Boston, things at times looked pretty bleak for Niberd Abdalla. For more than seven months beginning last June, the Iraqi immigrant faced deportation to a country where he fears death.

"I will be targeted," Abdalla, of Northampton, told the Daily Hampshire Gazette in August — a fear compounded in no small part by his Kurdish ethnicity. "They will bury me alive."

However, although Abdalla was not initially eligible for bond, a team led by Northampton lawyer Buz Eisenberg volunteered endless hours fighting for Abdalla's freedom. And, on Jan. 25, an immigration judge in Boston ordered Abdalla released, much to the delight of his wife, Ellen McShane, and a community of supporters.

Eisenberg and others, meanwhile, continue working to reopen Abdalla's case, to have his removal order canceled and to get him legal status.

"It took an attorney taking the extra step," Megan Kludt, a local immigration attorney who has also worked on Abdalla's case, said of Eisenberg. And Kludt and Eisenberg are far from the only ones volunteering on the local level to fill a gap in legal immigration resources.

Abdalla and many other local immigrants have gained access to much-needed legal resources through the Immigrant Protection Project, a coordinated regional initiative on the part of the American Civil Liberties Union of Western Massachusetts, local lawyers, volunteers and community organizations. After around a year of operation, the project has expanded its work providing legal assistance referrals and advice for immigrants and their advocates in the Pioneer Valley and beyond.

The project is full of lawyers volunteering their time, including many local faces who have similarly worked on long-term or complex cases, and other Valley lawyers who are on the project's coordinating committee.

However, the organization's foundation — its first point of contact for local residents in need — is its call center, run by some 25 bilingual volunteers. Those volunteers field phone calls from immigrants with legal questions or problems, and from as many as 30 community partner organizations. Those groups will also refer people to the project.

"We're getting calls on an extremely wide range of issues," said project coordinator Javier Luengo-Garrido, who previously worked as a liaison, interpreter and education specialist in the Northampton school system.

Call center volunteers come from many different professions and countries, Luengo-Garrido said, and they help to direct immigrants to legal services that will provide them with free assistance for everything from deportation proceedings to obtaining passports for citizen children.

Sitting with a decision tree in front of her late last month, volunteer Camila Rodriguez of Northampton was speaking in Spanish to someone about how an older citizen child might apply for legal status for a parent.

Following a detailed set of instructions, Rodriguez was able to gather all the pertinent information needed for a debrief conversation with Luengo-Garrido. The two then made a judgment about what legal services the caller would benefit from: a family law attorney and possibly an interpreter.

"It's just a reality check that it's happening right here, next to us, all the time," Rodriguez said of federal immigration enforcement and the effects it has on local immigrants. "It made me realize how bad the situation is, how bad people have it."

The project provides legal referrals to immigrants for a wide range of situations, and also trains others to do the same in their communities.

"We have a central place where immigrants and their families and supporters can call," said Bill Newman, director of the local ACLU office and one of the project's founders. Newman described the landscape of immigrant legal materials prior to the project's creation as underorganized and underresourced.

Kludt, the Northampton immigration-law expert, is another of the project's founders, and said the group initially tried to prepare for what they thought would be most-needed during the administration of President Donald Trump: lawyers who could provide legal defense to immigrant detainees.

But soon it became clear other things were more needed. Recently, Trump's rescission of two programs has been the focus of many calls: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, which shields young undocumented immigrants from deportation; and Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, which offers relief to immigrants who are already in the United States from countries impacted by natural disasters or armed conflict.

"That's the need of the community and what we're requested to address," Newman said.

"We are getting to a point where our state of mind is that we have to be flexible with whatever the immigrant community needs," Luengo-Garrido added.

Another service the IPP has worked on is a "family preparedness plan" — a packet of advice on child care and legal rights, as well as translated forms, that helps immigrant families prepare for the possibility of family separation. The booklet has been endorsed by the state's attorney general.

Now, the project's volunteer army, around a year into its work, consists of dozens of lawyers specializing in bond hearings, family law and habeas corpus, some 10 translators, the 25 call-center workers and others. Partner organizations include local groups such as Casa Latina, Catholic Charities, Holyoke Health Center, the Pioneer Valley Workers Center and University of Massachusetts Translation Center.

"There was an incredible amount of people willing to do something a year ago," Luengo-Garrido said, referring to the time around Trump's election and inauguration. "How it started was with this raw energy. Now we've been able to harness that energy."

An example of the quickness with which the project and partner organizations can respond happened on Nov. 7, when federal immigration agents pulled over a van in Hatfield with nine farmworkers inside. The target of the stop was the driver, but agents with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, also arrested two other men. All of them were undocumented Guatemalan immigrants.

A phone call about the raid came in to the Pioneer Valley Workers Center's emergency hotline, and that group dispatched volunteers to the scene. The project was alerted and was able to arrange for a lawyer and interpreter to meet

the detainees almost immediately at the Franklin County House of Correction.

Kludt said the project has been able to build an extensive network that can remain digitally connected — and in many ways work like their own law firm — using software designed by the prominent immigration lawyer Stephen Manning, who like Kludt has worked representing clients on the U.S.-Mexico border.

"A project like this would never work without that," she said of the software, which was developed for teams of lawyers traveling back and forth from the border and is given for free to pro-bono organizations like the Immigrant Protection Project.

And the project's network is expanding still. Sitting at the large desk surrounded by books in his Northampton office, Newman spoke about a recent training they had conducted in Boston, and was surprised to learn that another was fast approaching in Berkshire County. Newman said the project has done as many as 16 of those trainings.

ICE's infrastructure in New England is spread out between the agency's regional office in Boston, sub-office in Hartford, Connecticut, and several detention centers the agency operates, like one at the Franklin County House of Correction in Greenfield.

For that reason, and to spread the project's successes, the project has begun to connect with interested lawyers and advocates not just from Massachusetts, but from other states, too, including Connecticut and New Hampshire.

"It's bigger than just us, and that's part of what makes it so exciting and uplifting," Kludt said.

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A Look Inside Georgia's Newest Immigration Detention Center

By Jeremy Redmon

[Eugene \(OR\) Register-Guard](#), March 12, 2018

FOLKSTON, Ga. — Behind tall fences topped with coils of barbed wire in this rural corner of South Georgia, hundreds of immigrants from around the world are facing deportation. Eventually, they will file into a small room here and appear before an immigration judge via a video link so they can get an answer to the all-important question: Can I stay or must I go?

The privately operated detention center where they are being held is confronting a similar question about its fate. In November, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement moved to close the Folkston ICE Processing Center, citing "low usage." Days later, the agency said it was re-evaluating that decision after Republican U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter, who represents the area, pushed hard to keep the facility open.

An ICE spokeswoman wouldn't elaborate about the detention center's future, saying her agency "doesn't comment on ongoing contract negotiations or activity." But during an exclusive tour of the facility that ICE recently granted The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, there were no indications it was shutting down or even shrinking. On the day of the AJC's visit, the 780-bed center was holding 661 detainees. Many grim-faced immigrants in blue uniforms could be seen waiting for their appointments in the health clinic, reading in the library and standing in line for lunch.

Carter said the pressure to close the facility "seems to have eased" since November, adding he has been working to facilitate a meeting about it between ICE and the Florida-based corrections company that operates it, GEO Group.

The congressman is defending the facility at a time when Georgia lawmakers are scrambling to eradicate rural poverty across the state. He has joined Charlton County, where just over one-quarter of the 12,497 residents live in poverty, in rallying to protect the 233 jobs, \$10 million in annual payroll and \$265,000 in annual county property tax revenue and fees tied to the center. GEO, which also operates the federal D. Ray James Correctional Institution next door, is Charlton's largest employer.

"There are a lot of people here who work there and rely on" the detention center, said Patti Gantt, the owner of Gantt Hardware and Hunting, a Folkston store that sells guns, ammunition and television sets to GEO workers. "If it closes, people would have to go an hour's drive to find a job."

Critics want ICE to shut down the Folkston facility and sever ties with private companies such as GEO.

"This immigrant prison doesn't benefit anyone but the company and county officials profiting off of the suffering of immigrants inside," said Christina Fialho, the executive director of Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement, which wants to end immigration detention in the U.S. "This facility is a waste of taxpayer dollars and needs to be immediately closed."

The Trump administration, meanwhile, is pushing to add hundreds of additional detention center beds as it ratchets up immigration enforcement across the nation. Last month, ICE won a victory when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-3 that people held in immigration detention centers do not have a right to periodic hearings to determine whether they should be released on bond. Some are now held for months or even years behind bars.

In the court's decision, Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito Jr. wrote that detaining immigrants during their deportation proceedings gives the government "time to determine an alien's status without running the risk of the alien either absconding or engaging in criminal activity before a final decision can be made."

A long stretch of dark fabric hangs on the fence separating the immigration detention center and the federal prison next door. ICE asked for the nearly opaque covering to "create a visual barrier/separation" between the two GEO-run facilities, both of which were once part of the same federal prison complex.

In December 2016, Charlton and ICE signed a no-bid contract to open the immigration detention center next to the prison, a five-year agreement that will cost taxpayers \$1.9 million a month regardless of whether all the beds in the center are filled. To accommodate the immigrant detainees, officials renovated the former prison building, expanded the parking lot and added a soccer field and running track.

Only men are held there. Most are arrested along the U.S.-Mexican border and at ports of entry in California and Texas. Many come from Mexico and Central America, while others have traveled from Cameroon, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Nepal and Pakistan.

They share common rooms and sleep on blue bunk beds, use communal bathrooms and gather around octagon-shaped tables topped with chessboards. Citing privacy reasons, ICE did not permit the AJC to interview them without obtaining written permission from the agency and the detainees in advance.

But immigrant rights advocates who have visited them inside the detention center wonder about their medical care and to what extent ICE is putting them in solitary confinement. They cited the deaths of three detainees who had been held in other immigration detention centers in Georgia since May.

In January, a 33-year-old Cuban national died from pneumonia while in ICE custody after being held at a separate immigration detention center operated by a different corrections company in Stewart County. And in May, a 58-year-old Indian man who was being detained by ICE at the Atlanta City Detention Center died at Grady Memorial Hospital because of complications from congestive heart failure.

A doctor works at the immigration detention center in Folkston 10 hours a day, three days a week, and a nurse practitioner is there the other four days, according to GEO. The doctor is on call after hours for emergencies.

On May 15, a 27-year-old Panamanian national with a history of mental illness hanged himself with a sheet after being held in solitary confinement for 20 days at the Stewart Detention Center, which is operated by Nashville, Tenn.-based CoreCivic. GEO said it has used its "restrictive housing unit" in Folkston only once since December and that was for four days for a detainee who had committed "misconduct infractions." GEO added that a licensed clinical social worker and a psychologist work at the Folkston center on weekdays. Further, "suicide observation rooms" are available in the facility's medical department, according to GEO.

Advocates have also raised concerns about the center's remote location. It sits in a rural area near the alligator-filled Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, about five hours southeast of Atlanta. ICE said it chose the Folkston site partly because it is less than an hour from the Jacksonville International Airport in Florida and because other detention centers in the region were already full.

Still, its remote location makes it difficult for families and attorneys to visit, said the Rev. Leeann Culbreath, a deacon with the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia. She visited the center in March of last year and spent time with about 40 of the detainees in the dining hall. Most were from India and many had been transferred from detention centers in Arizona, California, Florida and Virginia. Roughly three-quarters didn't have attorneys.

That doesn't bode well for their legal cases. One out of every 10 immigrants wins his or her asylum case in immigration courts, according to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a research organization that monitors the federal government. Nearly half are successful when they have attorneys.

"They feel forgotten. They are out in the middle of nowhere," said Culbreath, a co-founder of the Tifton-based South Georgia Immigrant Support Network.

Recognizing those challenges, the Southern Poverty Law Center recently began offering free legal support for detainees at the Folkston facility, said Elizabeth Matherne, a lead attorney for the SPLC's Southeast Immigrant Freedom Initiative.

"If you put the detainee on the farthest corner of the United States," she said, "obviously it is going to be difficult for anyone to visit them, let alone help hire an attorney for them with any sort of due diligence."

Dawn Malin recently pulled her khaki Subaru Crosstrek into the former site of the West Fraser lumber mill, a huge industrial space north of Folkston with vast empty sheds, loading ramps that lead to nowhere and weedy driveways that give it the feel of a post-apocalyptic movie set. The mill — which at one time employed about 135 people — closed roughly 10 years ago, said Malin, Charlton's economic development director.

Giving the AJC a driving tour of the county, Malin traveled a mile south to Charlton Memorial Hospital, a darkened building with an empty helipad. Weighed down by millions of dollars in debt, the brick hospital with tan trim closed in 2013.

"We have had several hits already to our economy, so it was a great boost when ICE came in" with the immigration detention center, said Malin, who also leads the local chamber of commerce.

By some estimates, Folkston's immigration detention center is expected to create an estimated economic impact of

\$42 million for the region and \$21 million in revenue for GEO. It is also home to more than 10 percent of Charlton's 2,000 jobs, Malin said, so shutting it down would be like a punch in the gut for the county.

Malin ended her tour at Thai Smile, a popular downtown Folkston restaurant that serves pad Thai, sushi and hibachi food. The owner, Somsak Sangsawangwatana, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Thailand, sympathizes with the immigrants who wind up in the detention center. But he also worries what would happen to Folkston's economy if it were to close. GEO employees, he said, eat at his restaurant.

"Where are they going to go work if they close it up? It's not going to be good for people to lose their jobs and they have to move," he said. "How are they going to spend money?"

CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS

Man With AR-15-style Rifle Outside Indianapolis Women's March: What We Know

By Ryan Martin

[Indianapolis Star](#), March 12, 2018

Ahmed Alaklounk, a man living in Indiana, was charged in federal court after two gun scares, including one involving an AR-15-style rifle outside a Downtown Indianapolis hotel on the day of the Women's March in January.

The charge in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Indiana came last week. He also was charged in state court in connection with another gun incident.

Here's what we know about the cases so far.

Who is Ahmed Alaklounk?

Alaklounk, 22, lived in the Indianapolis area but was in the country illegally, officials say.

He is a native of Tunisia and citizen of Saudi Arabia, according to court records.

He last entered the U.S. on Jan. 10, 2016, through Washington Dulles International Airport on a student visa, records say. That student visa was terminated in September 2017, which put him out of compliance and made it illegal for him to be in the country.

He owns Medo Tire Shop at 3546 W. 16th St. on the west side, according to court documents.

Court documents also spell his name as Achmed Alaklounk. Which is the correct spelling is unclear.

What happened?

There are two incidents involving Alaklounk and guns.

The first of Alaklounk's two run-ins occurred around 3 a.m. on Jan. 20 at the Downtown Hyatt Regency, according to court records.

Hotel security called Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department officers after seeing several firearms inside Alaklounk's truck parked at the hotel. Police told him to secure

his weapons in a hotel safe or out of sight in his vehicle because leaving them in the open could result in a break-in.

As Alaklounk moved a 22-caliber semi-automatic rifle to the back seat, records say, officers saw that the gun contained a scope, bipod and bump stock.

Hotel security were concerned because Alaklounk's hotel room overlooked the gathering area of the Women's March planned for that day. At least 3,500 people would later attend the march.

He was later kicked out of the hotel because security could still see the rifle through his truck windows later that morning, records say.

Why he rented the hotel room was unclear. Representatives for U.S. Attorney Josh Minkler and Immigration and Customs Enforcement declined to comment Monday.

What is a bump stock?

Bump stocks essentially modify a semi-automatic rifle to use the weapon's recoil to replicate fully automatic firing.

They gained notoriety late last year following a mass shooting in Las Vegas that left more than 50 people dead and several hundred others injured. Stephen Paddock, the suspect in the shooting, is said to have mounted his numerous rifles with a collection of scopes, bipods and bump stocks.

Bump stocks are legal, but President Donald Trump's administration is pushing to outlaw them. On Saturday, the Department of Justice took a first step by submitting a notice to the Office of Management and Budget in the White House that would lead to a ban.

Las Vegas shooting: Full victim list

What were the guns that he had?

Court records say Alaklounk possessed six handguns and the rifle.

The 22-caliber semi-automatic rifle was modified to function and look like an AR-15. It also had been equipped with a scope, bipod and bump stock.

Alaklounk told police his rifle was "fully tricked out," according to court documents.

Two handguns referenced in the second incident were actually pellet guns resembling semi-automatic pistols, police say. Whether the same handguns were in Alaklounk's truck during the first incident is unclear.

At Alaklounk's home, officers also found a 9mm handgun.

What was the second incident?

The second incident, which happened a week later on Jan. 27, is the one that led to local charges.

In an interview with police, a woman said she bought a tire from Medo Tire but it did not hold air. She and her father went to the shop, where a disagreement about the tire led to a fight.

Court records say Alaklounk grabbed the woman's father by the neck and threw him to the ground. As he tried to get up, two of Alaklounk's employees surrounded him.

Alaklounk and one employee then each pulled a handgun, records say. The woman then pulled a handgun from inside her car and fired it into the air.

Alaklounk then went into the tire shop and returned with his rifle, records say. He told the woman and her father: "If you leave, I'll f----- kill you."

After he told his employee to hold the two, Alaklounk pulled his truck behind the woman's vehicle so she could not leave.

The woman called police. Alaklounk dropped his handgun when officers arrived.

Alaklounk's attorney in the local case, Jennifer Lukemeyer, declined to comment on Sunday.

Why didn't police act sooner?

Alaklounk appears to have entered law enforcement's radar following the run-in at the hotel.

After he was told to leave the hotel, IMPD officers monitored him at the tire shop, according to court records.

That also is when U.S. Department of Homeland Security began investigating Alaklounk's immigration status and whether he could possess guns.

What is he charged with?

A federal criminal complaint filed March 7 alleges Alaklounk unlawfully possessed a firearm, which is against federal law when the person is in the country illegally.

The court documents contains details relevant only to the one alleged crime. But federal investigators are looking into allegations that Alaklounk "violated several provisions" of federal law, according to court documents. Court documents do not spell out what those provisions are.

Prosecutors could pursue more charges later if investigators uncover more evidence.

Alaklounk also is facing six criminal charges in Marion Superior Court: two felony counts of criminal confinement, two felony counts of intimidation, one felony count of unlawful possession of a firearm and a battery misdemeanor.

If convicted of the state charges, Alaklounk could face up to 16 years in state prison for each of two felony counts; up to six years each for two other counts; and up to 2 1/2 years for the fifth felony count.

If convicted of the federal gun crime, Alaklounk could face up to 10 years in federal prison.

Court records also show U.S. Department of Homeland Security placed an immigration detainer in Marion County Jail for Alaklounk. Detainers are used to hold a suspect in jail while federal agents obtain a warrant to begin deportation proceedings.

Alaklounk remained in Marion County Jail as of Monday afternoon, authorities said.

Where did the guns come from?

Alaklounk initially told police that the rifle belonged to his father, records say. But investigators learned that Alaklounk's father, a Saudi Arabian citizen, left the U.S. last February.

After the second incident, Alaklounk said he obtained the rifle from a customer after working on a car's tires, records say. Alaklounk also said he bought one of his handguns from a customer for \$300.

He told police that he kept the rifle in his truck because his wife didn't want them in the home, records say.

He did not have an Indiana handgun license, according to court documents. Indiana does not require a license to carry a rifle.

What is the tire store?

The business does not appear to operate like many other tire shops. There is no evidence of a website or Facebook page, for example, and an IndyStar review of online business filings could not find one for Medo Tire or one registered to Alaklounk.

The Indiana Secretary of State's website was unable to find records either.

Most commerce at Medo Tire appears to occur through Facebook Marketplace, where more than three dozen listings could be found Monday for used tires and rims.

An IndyStar journalist visiting the tire shop Sunday found a sign saying it was open 24/7, but the windows were dark and the doors were closed. Outside, a few piles of old tires lay along the store's parking lot.

Call IndyStar reporter Ryan Martin at (317) 444-6294. Follow him on Facebook and on Twitter: @ryanmartin

Saudi Citizen Faces Federal Gun Charge After Having Assault Rifle In Hotel Overlooking Women's March, Indiana Cops Say

By Jared Gilmour

Charlotte (NC) Observer, March 12, 2018

His black Chevrolet Avalanche was parked at an Indianapolis hotel in January on the day of the city's Women's March — and the vehicle was loaded with weapons, Indianapolis police said.

There was an AR-15-style rifle stowed between the front passenger seat and the middle console of the pickup, as well as six handguns scattered in the back, according to a criminal complaint. Concerned employees at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Indianapolis had called police to investigate at 3 a.m. on Jan. 20 after they noticed the firearms in the vehicle.

When police spoke to the man the car was registered to — Ahmed Alaklounk, 22 — he admitted the car was his, and said the rifle belonged to his father. Noticing the weapon had been equipped with a scope, bipod and bump stock, police said they asked Alaklounk if it was in fact a bump stock. He

responded yes, saying "it's fully tricked out," according to the criminal complaint.

Bump stocks are used to accelerate the firing rate of rifles. Las Vegas shooter Stephen Paddock used a bump stock during the October 2017 shooting he carried out at a music festival, killing 58 and injuring hundreds more with a rapid-fire spray of bullets from his hotel room overlooking the concert.

Alaklounk — a Saudi citizen and native of Tunisia — had no gun permit, an expired Indiana driver's license and had been living in Indiana illegally on a terminated student visa since September 2017, according to the criminal complaint. He's now facing federal charges for possessing a gun while living in the country illegally. If convicted, he could face up to 10 years in federal prison.

The room he was staying at Jan. 20 overlooked the site of Indianapolis' 2018 Women's March, which drew about 3,500 women, the Indianapolis Star reports. But Alaklounk wasn't arrested until about a week later, during a second gun-related incident, police said.

During their first encounter with Alaklounk at 3 a.m. on Jan. 20, police told him "not to leave firearms in the open due to the amount of vehicle break ins that occur in the downtown Indianapolis area," the complaint said. Police told Alaklounk either to put the weapons in his hotel safe or keep them out of sight in the car.

At 7:45 a.m., though, hotel security checked to see if the weapons had been moved, and saw the rifle in the same place between the middle console and the passenger's seat. Realizing his room overlooked the march, the hotel asked police to remove Alaklounk. Indianapolis police had Alaklounk and two unidentified men leave the room, according to the criminal complaint, and then authorities monitored Alaklounk that day as he went to the tire shop he owns in he city.

A week later, though, Alaklounk was in trouble again, police said.

This time a woman arrived at the shop with her father on Jan. 27 complaining of a shoddy tire. A disagreement over the tire escalated into violence — with Alaklounk grabbing the father by the neck and forcing him to the ground, according to the complaint. Then Alaklounk and one of his employees pulled out guns and pointed them at the father, investigators said.

At that point, the woman grabbed her own gun and fired a shot in the air, hoping to get the armed men away from her father, according to the complaint. Instead, Alaklounk had the employees detain the pair as he ran to get his assault rifle. When he returned with the AR-15-style weapon, he told the woman and her father: "If you leave I'll f---g kill you," the complaint said.

As the woman got in the car to leave, Alaklounk kicked the vehicle and then blocked her car in with his own vehicle,

the complaint said. The woman and her father called police, and when authorities arrived Alaklounk dropped his weapon.

Alaklounk was arrested, an immigration detainee was placed on him and he was held at the Marion County Jail in Indianapolis, the complaint said. In connection with the incident, he was formally charged on Jan. 31 in Marion Superior court with two counts of felony criminal confinement, two counts of felony intimidation, felony unlawful possession of a firearm and misdemeanor battery, the Star reports.

Alaklounk told police the incident had started when the father became angry and pushed Alaklounk, according to the complaint. Alaklounk also said he'd received the rifle in exchange for "work done on tires on a customer's car."

Alaklounk told police he had been in the Saudi military before quitting, and wanted to join the U.S. Air Force, according to the complaint.

Drug-Smuggling Scouts Face More Jail Time Under New Strategy

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — Court records show that prosecutors are using a new strategy to seek stiffer sentences for drug-smuggling lookouts who station themselves on top of southern Arizona mountains.

The Arizona Daily Star found out that border patrol agents have begun tracking the number and size of marijuana seizures made in the line of sight of lookouts.

Those seizures are then cited by federal prosecutors when they ask judges to lengthen prison sentences for the lookouts.

The Star reported Saturday that the strategy has increased a typical plea offer for a scout with no criminal history from six months to 13 months.

The U.S. Attorney's Office has wrestled for at least four years with how to prosecute drug scouts, who often are arrested without marijuana, in Southern Arizona.

Information from: Arizona Daily Star,
<http://www.tucson.com>

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SECRET SERVICE

Woman Accused Of Ramming White House Barrier Undergoing Evaluation At Federal Hospital

By Jackie Bensen

WRC-TV Washington, March 12, 2018

The woman who police say rammed a security barrier at the White House with her van while armed with a pistol is

undergoing a psychological examination at a federal medical center.

U.S. Secret Service officers took 35-year-old Jessica Ford of La Vergne, Tennessee, into custody on Feb. 23 after she struck the pop-up barrier near the White House, at 17th and E streets, the Secret Service said.

She was charged with impeding police and damaging government property, but her criminal case is on hold until the examination is complete, according to court records reviewed by the News4 I-Team. The evaluation could be completed in a month.

She had been arrested previously for trying to climb the White House fence twice in 2017.

No shots were fired and no one in law enforcement was injured in the incident, the Secret Service said, but a witness said he heard what he thought sounded like gunshots.

"After she hit the barricade, she just kept pressing on the gas and trying to push through, I guess," Chris Bello said. "That's what it looked like. And then they ordered her to stop, and they fire because she wouldn't stop."

He said it sounded like two or three shots.

It appears officers may have used something to smash the van's windows, possibly to get Ford out of the vehicle.

"I heard like a firecracker," witness Kimberlie Flauto said. "It didn't sound like a crash or anything and then I turned around and saw all the smoke and as soon as I saw all the smoke. And all the police were starting to pile out the back of the White House and from across the street. And then everybody's just screaming, 'Go, go!' and that's when I told all the kids, Go."

According to a police report, an officer saw a gun in Ford's hand before she was taken out of the van. The weapon was pointed in the opposite direction of the officers, and Ford ignored multiple commands from officers to drop the gun. Two officers had to take the gun from her hands before forcibly removing her from the van, the report said.

Officers arrested Ford and charged her with unlawful entry, carrying a pistol without a license, unregistered firearm, aggravated assault on a police officer, assault with a dangerous weapon-car, destruction of government property and contempt of court.

Records state that while officers were taking Ford to jail she said "she had the 'BB gun' because if James Burris was the president the officers would shoot her to protect him and that she knowingly brought the gun with her."

A law enforcement official said the Secret Service knows Ford because she's been around the White House before. She's believed to have mental or emotional issues.

On May 17, 2017, Ford was caught scaling the White House fence. She was rearrested July 6 when she violated a stay-away order at the White House.

Ford was again charged with several criminal violations and taken to the Metropolitan Police Department.

The White House was locked down but concern about the incident was low, NBC News Justice Correspondent Pete Williams reported. Secret Service and George Washington University police officers blocked off the area.

Operations at the White House returned to normal before 6 p.m.

President Donald Trump had just met with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at the White House.

"Thank you to the great men and women of the United States @SecretService for a job well done!" the president tweeted.

The News4 I-Team has reported more than 20 White House security breaches in the past four years. Many of them involve people with mental or emotional issues, and many of them try to do it again.

Counterfeit Currency Spikes In Eastern Iowa

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

DUBUQUE, Iowa (AP) — Authorities have found a growing presence of counterfeit currency in eastern Iowa, and they're educating the public on how to avoid falling victim to fake money scams.

Dubuque Police Department Lt. Joe Messerich told the Telegraph Herald that officials identified a "significant spike in counterfeit cases" in the area, particularly during last fall.

The Dubuque County Attorney's Office saw a 128 percent jump in felony forgery cases last year, with 73 cases filed compared to 32 in 2016.

"We see various types of forged bills," Messerich said. "Some are fairly sophisticated, and some are not. Some you can see why people would be fooled. Others look like Monopoly money."

He said some forged bills are made locally, while another source is the "dark web." It's a part of the internet only accessible using specialized software that allows users to remain anonymous.

Messerich said they've also seen a recent trend of person-to-person forgeries through services including Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace. He said they're working to educate the public on how to spot fake money.

"Awareness is the biggest thing for us," Messerich said. "Just recognizing the signs of counterfeit bills."

Dubuque County Attorney Ralph Potter said counterfeiters are focusing on smaller denominations such as \$10 or \$20 bills, which used to not be the case because of the time and effort involved.

While the U.S. Secret Service is the federal agency that polices counterfeiting schemes, local authorities often do the bulk of the work, said Messerich.

"It's such a prevalent crime that any time there's a fake bill passed, the Secret Service isn't going to come and work that," he said.

Potter said the issue extends beyond the city.

"I've talked to prosecutors in Johnson (County) and Davenport," Potter said. "Everybody's having the same problem."

Information from: Telegraph Herald,
<http://www.thonline.com>

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EMERGENCY RESPONSE

FEMA Offers Tips For Rebuilding After Harvey At Home Improvement Stores

By Katherine Feser

Houston Chronicle, March 12, 2018

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has teamed up with area home improvement stores to provide information and tips to help with recovery efforts after Hurricane Harvey.

FEMA mitigation specialists will offer information on how to prevent or reduce damage from future disasters when rebuilding. Recovery topics covered include flood insurance, elevating utilities and rebuilding flooded homes.

Representatives will be the following locations, March 12-17: McCoy's Building Supply, 675 FM 517, Alvin; Lowe's, 1655 W. FM 646, League City; Katy Lowe's, 19935 Katy Freeway; Home Depot, 3910 Eastex Freeway, Beaumont; and Lowe's, 150 S. FM 1069, Aransas Pass.

The information and literature is geared to do-it-yourself work and general contractors.

New Orleans School Officials Battle For Another \$50 Million From FEMA In Rebuilding Money

By Andrew Vanacore

New Orleans Advocate, March 12, 2018

New Orleans public school officials are battling the Federal Emergency Management Agency for another \$50 million or so in rebuilding money, asking a federal judge to void a recent decision by an arbitration panel that went against the local school district.

FEMA awarded local schools roughly \$2 billion in 2010 to cover the cost of rebuilding dozens of campuses damaged by the flooding that followed Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

But the agency held back about \$200 million while the board pursued a lawsuit against its insurers. FEMA said it would hand over the rest only after determining whether money eventually paid as a result of the suit would be "duplicative" of pending federal aid.

Eventually, the Orleans Parish School Board got just under \$127 million out of the insurers, and FEMA concluded that about \$90 million was duplicative.

The board and the state-run Recovery School District, which took over most campuses in the city after Katrina, argue that FEMA's dollar figure is essentially arbitrary.

They've concluded that most of what the insurers paid out was for expenses other than what FEMA agreed to compensate them for and that the agency should cough up another \$46 million or \$50 million, depending on which of several calculations is used.

But after more than a year of negotiations, they lost out in a 2-1 decision by an arbitration panel in Washington, D.C., in December.

Now, the board and the RSD are asking a federal judge in New Orleans to overturn that decision. Brent Barriere, an attorney for the board, said the arbitration panel improperly assigned the burden of proof to local officials, rather than FEMA.

Whatever the outcome, there's no doubt schools in New Orleans could use more money for buildings. The \$2 billion promised by FEMA was never going to cover all of the district's needs, given how old some of the city's school buildings are. Maintenance problems were legion long before the storm.

"A lot of the older buildings only received partial repairs," said Ken Ducote, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Collaborative of Charter Schools, adding that some buildings still lack basics like a gymnasium or handicapped-accessible features.

"Certainly not all buildings were brought up to current standards," he said.

Follow Andrew Vanacore on Twitter, @avanacore

CYBER NEWS

Homeland Security Sees No 'Nefarious Activity' Threatening Cybersecurity Ahead Of Midterms

Daily Beast, March 12, 2018

It's apparently all quiet on the election front. Bob Kolasky, a Department of Homeland Security official working on election cybersecurity issues, told The Daily Beast that DHS hasn't seen evidence of foreign actors attempting to hack American election infrastructure ahead of the 2018 midterms.

"We have not seen anything in the 2018 election, no," Kolasky told The Daily Beast last week in an exclusive interview. "We have not seen any significant nefarious activity."

Preparing to counter nefarious activity has been a major project for DHS since the 2016 general election, when the Kremlin launched an information attack on the United States. The American Intelligence Community concluded in January 2017 that Russian-backed actors stole emails from the

Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta, and also launching a wide-ranging social media campaign using stolen American identities. And last September, DHS told 21 states that Kremlin-backed operatives also tried to compromise their voter databases.

Kolasky told The Daily Beast that the biggest change at DHS since the 2016 election has been efforts to build closer relationships with state and local election officials. In the last election cycle, those relationships had been lacking.

"Part of that problem was that the [2016] attacks were not on states, they were on local systems, and DHS claimed to have contacted the local systems," said Jim Condos, Vermont secretary of state and president-elect of the National Association of Secretaries of State. "We struggled with them in one of our meetings—talking with them for an hour, trying to get them to understand. This is the criticism from the beginning of 2016. DHS did not understand how the election system worked."

Condos continued, "We tried to them that if one state is attacked, all are attacked. If a local system is attacked, the whole state is attacked—and other states need to be in communications with one another."

Kolasky said that Homeland Security has come a long way since 2016.

"We've gotten to really learn and understand the way that elections are conducted," Kolasky said. "We have a richer understanding of the election management systems: the way they run processes and the best way to share information with them."

In the months since the 2016 mess, he said DHS officials have had "a little bit of a crash course on what it means to run an election." And, Kolasky added, senior department officials have met with most states' top election officials.

Another major change has been getting state and local election officials security clearances so they can view classified information about election threats. Kolasky said that the department made clearances available to more than 160 election officials in September, and that 19 have received clearances so far.

"DHS is in the process of doing that for all 50 states," said former Chairman of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission Matthew Masterson. "States need to request the clearance, but DHS is expediting the process."

"Secretary Lawson, along with other secretaries of state, is in the process of obtaining a security clearance that will allow her greater access to sensitive information," said Ian Hauer, deputy communications director for Indiana's secretary of state. "In return, we're educating DHS on our state and local-level cyber-protections and offering feedback on the systems they have set up."

And in February, Kolasky added, a host of officials got temporary one-day clearances for a briefing on election threats.

And while President Donald Trump has expressed skepticism that the Russian government threatened the 2016 election, Kolasky said the White House's National Security Council has been a major partner in DHS' efforts to block future election attacks. They have been especially helpful with bringing different federal agencies together, he said. He added that White House chief of staff John Kelly, who formerly headed DHS, has played a role in the work.

The National Protection and Programs Directorate, a low-profile component of DHS, has taken on the task of securing elections. The arm of DHS, through the Office of Cybersecurity and Communications, has provided services to state and local election officials—including cyber hygiene scans and cyber resilience reviews to check their election systems' security (PDF).

NPPD also funds MS-ISAC, a cybersecurity database designed to help states stay up-to-date about threats. The system was just formalized as a means of communication between state and federal agencies for cyberthreats at the Government Coordinating Council meeting.

While many states use NPPD's services, they aren't mandatory (the feds wouldn't have the power to require them even if they wanted to).

When state, local, and federal operations are all attempting to work together to protect themselves from an unpredictable and evolving force, communication has been key to get a grip on the learning curve before the 2018 midterms arrive. All parties say they know the risks involved if they don't.

"Every event or conference I have attended, the number one conversation I have with state officials is about securing the system, and what additional resources are available," Masterson said. "There's been a heightened awareness since 2016."

Indiana Secretary Of State Connie Lawson Addresses Voters On Security Issues

WBIW-AM Bedford (IN), March 12, 2018

(INDIANAPOLIS) – Indiana Secretary of State Connie Lawson wrote an open letter to American Voters:

There are real threats to all digital technologies, including those used to run elections. Election officials across the country are working day and night to identify, mitigate, and deter these threats. Our efforts seek to improve the overall security of election systems to ensure your votes remain safe and the process reflects your will.

In 2016, the intelligence community determined state voter registration systems were the target of cyber scanning activities by the Russian government. We have evidence that

in one case those efforts resulted in the successful theft of voter data from an online system.

However, election security is not something that began in 2016. Election officials have always viewed the security of our elections process as an essential component of our work. What is new is the potential for better information and resources from the intelligence community and federal agencies.

Notably, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has said repeatedly that the types of systems Russian actors targeted were NOT involved in vote tallying. Vote tallying systems have a lower cyber-risk profile than the other connected systems we rely upon to bring voters information and services.

Intelligence agencies agree these activities will intensify in scope and sophistication and could involve different actors and tactics. Election officials are acutely aware that the systems we manage are targets for bad actors, foreign and domestic, just like many high-profile companies and other government agencies. A strong defense requires a coordinated response from all levels of government, the private sector, and you, the voters. Any attempt to disrupt and delegitimize elections is an affront to democracy and is not acceptable to anyone in the elections community.

Since DHS designated elections as critical infrastructure in January 2017, local, state, and federal officials have worked tirelessly – and collaboratively – to respond. In every state, we are working hard to increase our defenses, build new detection techniques and plan for and practice recovery from possible incidents. We have also engaged private sector partners, non-profits and universities to help protect our systems.

In October 2017, a Government Coordinating Council was formed to ensure federal information and resources reach state and local election officials. The Council convened again on February 15, 2018 in Washington D.C. and we, its Executive Committee members, represent our colleagues in the elections community. The Council marks the first of its kind collaboration between federal, state and local officials to secure elections. We are formalizing information sharing protocols to ensure timely and action-able threat information reaches all election officials so they can respond to threats as they emerge.

Our Council has guided the delivery of direct resources from DHS to support state and local election officials including onsite risk and vulnerability assessments, as well as a variety of other services and trainings to support election officials. While Council members and state election officials were in D.C., we participated in classified briefings given by FBI, DHS, and officials from the Office of the Director for National Intelligence. This was an important first step.

These efforts require a "whole of government approach" on investment. Upgrading technology and investing in staff

with cyber expertise at the state and local level will carry a significant price tag and must be a continuous effort. This is a race with no finish line. Failing to invest will leave us less secure than we need to be, and increase the probability that aspects of the election process will face service disruptions that threaten electoral confidence. While not every federal or state bill professing to support elections security will be appropriate, and election officials are likely to disagree on plenty of policy particulars, we hope you will support the eventual investment.

For the last 18 months voters have been confronted with some true and troubling information, and your natural concerns have been intensified by the misreported information about election security. The reality is that these stressful moments are not over, but voters don't have to sit idly by and worry. Make your voices heard and your actions speak. You can help by continuing to participate in our democracy: vote, be poll workers and attend pre-election testing or post-election audits. We run elections at the state and local level because this democracy is yours, and it requires your participation.

On behalf of our election colleagues around the country, we assure you that our eyes are wide open about potential threats and we are working every day on your behalf to make our elections secure.

The legitimacy of our leaders lies in the essential American belief that elections reflect the will of the people. We are committed to our roll as enablers and defenders of that trust.

Hon. Connie Lawson, Indiana Secretary of State, NASS President

Mr. Judd Choate, Director of Elections, Colorado, NASED Immediate Past President

Mr. Noah Praetz, Director of Elections, Cook County, Illinois, Election Center Representative

Hon. Thomas Hicks, Chairman, U.S. Election Assistance Commission

Hon. Robert Kolasky, Deputy Under Secretary (acting) for National Protection and Programs Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

The Election Infrastructure Subsector Government Coordinating Council (EIS-GCC) is the first group of its kind to help important stakeholders share vital information regarding the elections process. The EIS-GCC includes members from the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), the National Association of State Election Directors, the Election Center and the International Association of Government Officials.

Secretaries Of State Slam Provision To Allow Secret Service At Polling Places

By Daniella Diaz

CNN, March 12, 2018

Washington (CNN)More than a dozen secretaries of state slammed a rider attached to legislation to reauthorize the Department of Homeland Security that would allow Secret Service to be dispatched to polling places nationwide during a federal election.

"This is an alarming proposal which raises the possibility that armed federal agents will be patrolling neighborhood precincts and vote centers," according to the letter, which was obtained by CNN.

In the letter, which was sent Friday to Senate leaders Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, and Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, the 19 secretaries of state write that they believe the proposal is "unprecedented and shocking."

"Secretaries of State across the country agree that there is no discernable need for federal Secret Service agents to intrude, at the discretion of the president, who may also be a candidate in that election, into the thousands of citadels where democracy is enshrined," they wrote.

The legislation has already passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support, but it was not included in the Senate bill passed out of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee last week.

When asked for a comment, the White House referred CNN to the US Secret Service.

The Secret Service responded Monday to the Boston Globe, which first reported the story, saying the provision was "grossly mischaracterized."

"The only time armed Secret Service personnel would be at a polling place would be to facilitate the visiting of one of our protectees while they voted," the Secret Service said in a statement.

CNN has reached out to the House Appropriations Committee for comment on why the rider was included and has not yet received a response.

The full Senate still needs to approve the legislation, and then the House and Senate versions of the bills must be reconciled before going to President Donald Trump for approval.

Lawmakers Move To Expand DHS Cybersecurity Role

By Ramona Adams

ExecutiveGov, March 12, 2018

House and Senate lawmakers advanced two bills last Wednesday that would expand the Department of Homeland Security's cybersecurity mission.

The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee passed a DHS reauthorization bill that

would reorganize the department's National Protection and Programs Directorate; secure personally identifiable information; and support cybersecurity research, Covington & Burling's government contracts unit said Friday.

The Senate version of the bill includes an amendment that would rename NPPD as the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and elevate the organization's cybersecurity role.

The legislation would also direct

Customs and Border Protection to remove PII such as social security numbers, passport numbers and residential addresses from manifests prior to public disclosure.

A third amendment seeks to support cybersecurity technology research, development, testing, evaluation and transition in partnership with other federal agencies, industry and academia.

The House Homeland Security Committee approved the Cyber Incident Response Teams Act, which would authorize DHS' National Cybersecurity and Communications Integration Center to form cyber hunt and incident response teams.

The teams will help asset owners and operators restore services after a cyber incident; identify potential cybersecurity risks and unauthorized cyber activities; offer measures to address vulnerabilities; and recommend ways to optimize network and systems security.

The Act permits NCCIC to fill the Cyber Incident Response Teams with cybersecurity specialists from the government and private sector.

U.S. Is Unprepared For Cyber Threats – FCW

By Chase Gunter

Federal Computer Week, March 12, 2018

Sen. Mark Warner at a hearing of the Senate Select Intelligence Committee earlier this year.

When it comes to cyberattacks against critical infrastructure, election systems and businesses, Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.) believes the United States is "woefully unprepared" to handle threats from nation-states and others.

"We don't have our act together at all," Warner said at March 12 panel at South by Southwest. "We don't have a whole of government strategy... There needs to be a much greater sense of urgency."

Warner added this unpreparedness "goes back a decade-plus," and pointed to America's \$700 billion in annual defense spending – by far the most in the world – with proposed decreases in non-defense-specific research and development dollars and without a current cyber warfare doctrine.

"I would argue from a national security standpoint, we may be investing in the best 20th century military money can buy, and we ought to be thinking a lot of the conflict of the 21st century is going to be in cyber and misinformation and

disinformation," he said. "A reallocation of some of those resources would be worthy of debate."

Even in the wake of Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election, and with the clock ticking before the 2018 midterm elections, "we are not ready as a nation in terms of election security," he said.

Warner, who introduced the Honest Ads Act to require heavily trafficked websites to disclose information about ads purchased on their sites, said that legislation alone would not be enough to effectively protect against interference.

"What you don't want to have happen is a bunch of us in Washington... doing this in a non-collaborative fashion," he said. "Because then, we'll mess it up."

In building strong cybersecurity, Warner also lamented the federal government's inability to attract cyber talent, pointing to lower pay, the protracted hiring process and a massive backlog of security clearance requests as hindrances.

On the industry side, Warner noted that as more devices become connected as part of the internet of things, "we have not even minimum standards built into any of those devices."

"We may need at least to use the purchasing power of the government," he suggested. "At least DOD, and I would argue for the whole of government, we ought to not be buying devices that are going to extend our vulnerability and start with that kind of standard."

Warner also said in the wake of data breaches, namely the Equifax breach, "we at least ought to explore some level of software liability."

"There should be a penalty paid, and it shouldn't be a slap on the wrist," he said.

At Tech-centric SXSW, Technology Is Now Getting A Skeptical Look

By Rob Pegoraro

USA Today, March 12, 2018

AUSTIN — After years of being seen as a hothouse of exuberance about technology, this year's South By Southwest conference has soured a bit on the industry's prospects.

Social media in general, and Facebook in particular, have taken a beating in multiple panels, and one of America's foremost tech entrepreneurs used his SXSW talk to warn about the dangers of artificial intelligence.

A Friday-evening session about Facebook's relationship with news publishers set the tone early on.

Facebook's news head Alex Hardiman said the company, having recognized that its News Feed had traditionally rewarded "stuff that did well in raw engagement and clicks," was trying to do better. Her fellow panelist, CNN host Brian Stelter, acknowledged that progress but

challenged the social network to do more for quality journalism.

"Shouldn't we have a bigger conversation about Facebook paying more directly for some of the quality journalism that's out there?" he asked.

"Everything is on the table," Hardiman responded.

After years of cheerleading by lawmakers and consumers, big technology is facing a backlash that's even got its own term — techlash. The rapid growth of Facebook, Google and Amazon has fed fears that these companies control too much of the information that gets shared and, in Amazon's case, the goods and services consumers buy.

"The Web that many connected to years ago is not what new users will find today. What was once a rich selection of blogs and websites has been compressed under the powerful weight of a few dominant platforms," Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, wrote in an open letter Monday that proposed a regulatory framework to balance the interests of companies and Internet users. "This concentration of power creates a new set of gatekeepers, allowing a handful of platforms to control which ideas and opinions are seen and shared."

Compounded by revelations that Russian operatives manipulated Facebook, Twitter and Google-owned YouTube to sway voters in the 2016 race, uneasiness with the most valuable tech firms has grown, increasing pressure from some — such as Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va. — to regulate political ads on the networks.

Traditional media, notably newspaper mogul Rupert Murdoch, have renewed calls for Internet companies to better compensate the news outlets whose contents they share. Conservative groups complain the companies' politically liberal staff unfairly squash their views. And former employees and investors have taken aim at the Internet companies and Apple for creating devices that addict their users.

The Internet companies have begrudgingly acknowledged that they play a role as media providers — apologizing for sharing conspiracy theories and faked Facebook posts around the election. But they've clung to their defense that at heart, they are technology companies that provide the platform, not the curation, for the content.

That attitude took a ribbing Saturday from Vox Media executive editor Kara Swisher and CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour.

Swisher mocked Twitter and Facebook for refusing to call themselves media companies and instead reciting the stock phrase, "We're a tech platform that facilitates media" — a bit of useless vagueness that Amanpour criticized with a barnyard expletive.

That's a far cry from the uncritical reception that Wikileaks founder Julian Assange got for his appearance via

remote video in 2014, a SXSW keynote that has not aged well. Then again, he also bashed Facebook in that talk.

"People are realizing the power that technology has in our lives and asking technology companies to be more transparent and responsible," said Heather West, policy manager for Mozilla and a speaker at SXSW, in an interview Sunday. "And SXSW is an incredibly technologically savvy crowd who cares about these issues."

In a talk Saturday, Whitney Wolfe Herd — founder of dating and networking app Bumble — said a lack of gender diversity in technology has led to social networks whose mechanisms can invite harassment and abuse of the sort that white men don't usually experience online.

Name-checking Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, she said "these were not spaces built by women." She set a goal for Bumble that other social start-ups would be wise to adopt: "Engineer kindness on our platform."

The most depressing take on tech came from SpaceX and Tesla founder Elon Musk, a late-breaking addition to the SXSW schedule. In an onstage interview by Westworld co-creator Jonathan Nolan, he called for government regulation of general-purpose artificial intelligence, as opposed to the narrow sort that performs such tasks as allowing Tesla's electric cars to drive themselves.

"The danger of AI is much greater than the danger of nuclear warheads," he said. "If humanity decides that digital super-intelligence is the right move, we should do so very carefully."

Mike Godwin, a senior fellow with the R Street Institute, a Washington think tank, suggested that this skepticism represented a return to the climate of the mid-1990s, when SXSW first began adding tech programming. In an e-mail, he called that "a historical moment that was eerily similar to what we're experiencing now."

"I always assumed this transition was going to be a bumpy ride, so the current wave of bumps doesn't surprise me," he added.

But for all the tough talk on SXSW's stages, big tech has continued to march on. For instance, where last year's attendees could not use Uber and Lyft because they had fled Austin after the city government imposed strict fingerprinting requirements on their drivers, they're back, courtesy of the state legislature overturning the local rules.

One SXSW speaker versed in both technology and policy advised against reading too much into the current round of tech skepticism.

"The consolidation that's going on, the Amazons, Googles, all eating up other companies ... that creates a normal fear," said Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., in an interview Sunday.

The congressman, earlier the founder of the car-security firm Directed Electronics, pointed to the eight start-up firms he would be having dinner with that night as a reason

not to worry. "Their goal may be to sell to Google, but the reality is that innovation is still going on, and those people are still optimistic."

How The Government's Cyber Agency Rates On Cybersecurity

By Aaron Boyd

NextGov, March 12, 2018

The Homeland Security Department—the government's point agency for cybersecurity—fell short of top marks in three of five areas in the annual information security assessment, according to a report released Monday.

The 2017 Federal Information Security Management Act report rates the department's various cybersecurity capabilities on a scale of 1 through 5, with the lowest score, 1, representing an "ad-hoc" use of information security and the highest being an "optimized" cybersecurity posture.

"Per the FY 2017 reporting instructions, Level 4, 'managed and measureable,' represents an effective cybersecurity function," Homeland Security's inspector general wrote. "Where an agency achieves Level 4 in the majority of the five cybersecurity functions evaluated, its information security program may be considered effective overall."

The department fell just short of that target. Of the five categories assessed—identify, protect, detect, respond and recover—Homeland Security achieved Level 4 in two and Level 3 in the remaining three areas.

The department achieved Level 4 cleanly in the incident response category with no additional recommendations from the inspector general. Auditors also gave the department a Level 4 designation for its ability to identify risk areas but qualified that score, as a number of classified and unclassified systems are still running without updated authorities to operate, or ATOs.

As of June 2017, 64 systems were running without security authorizations, including 16 integral to national security and 48 unclassified systems. While problematic, these numbers are down significantly year over year, from 79 unclassified systems operating without ATOs in 2016 and 203 in 2015.

The department has a goal of 100-percent compliance for its high-value systems and 95 percent compliance for lower value assets within each of its component agencies. For high-value systems, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the National Protection and Programs Directorate—which oversees critical governmentwide cybersecurity initiatives—and the Coast Guard all fell short. For non-high-value assets, Homeland Security headquarters, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, ICE and NPPD missed the mark.

Level 3—Consistently Implemented

The other three efforts—protection, detection and recovery—are being implemented consistently, if not in a "managed and measureable" or "optimized" way, according to auditors, who gave the department a Level 3 ranking on each.

On the "protect" metric, the department fell short by not "implement[ing] all configuration settings required to protect component systems, continued using unsupported operating systems and did not apply security patches timely to mitigate critical and high-risk security vulnerabilities on selected systems," the report reads.

The audit found components were largely in compliance but failed to meet standards for certain security settings, such as disabling anonymous access to shared network drives. Similarly, most components were using approved, up-to-date operating systems. Some systems at headquarters, the Coast Guard and the Secret Service, however, were still using unsupported versions of Windows Server 2003.

Finally, the inspector general noted a lack of sufficient training opportunities for Homeland Security employees and an insufficient understanding of its workforce's cyber skills.

"Lacking such an assessment, DHS cannot assure that its employees possess the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their various job functions, or that qualified personnel are hired to fill cybersecurity-related positions," the report states. "DHS cited a lack of qualified security engineers from the overall labor market as the foremost reason for components failing to meet its [security authorization] metric."

Homeland Security failed to meet its goal on the "detect" metric, as well. While the department has a number of cybersecurity programs that help other federal agencies, its most widespread is Einstein, an advanced detection system designed to catch and stop known malicious traffic from entering federal networks.

Auditors declined to rate Homeland Security's internal detection efforts at Level 4 due to a lack of up-to-date software licenses for unclassified systems and reliance on data calls to components to monitor national security systems rather than using enterprise management tools to pull that data from a central location.

The inspector general also rated the department's "recovery" posture at Level 3, though not because of any specific incidents where the agency failed to rebound from an attack. The audit showed that the department and its components have fleshed out "Reconstruction Plans" in the event of a major incident but many of these plans have not been tested.

"Since the department's inception in 2003, components have not effectively managed and secured their information systems," the audit concluded. "Components have continued to operate systems without ATOs, used unsupported operating systems that expose DHS data to unnecessary

risks, ineffectively managed the [plans of action and milestones] process to mitigate identified security weaknesses and failed to apply security patches timely... Until DHS overcomes challenges to addressing its systemic information security weaknesses, it will remain unable to ensure that its information systems adequately protect the sensitive data they store and process."

Ultimately, the inspector general deemed "DHS has work to do to ensure the protection of the information and systems it uses to carry out its mission operations," and made five recommendations for the chief information security officer to pursue.

Homeland Security officials, including the CISO agreed with the auditors' findings and said the department was in the process of actively addressing them all.

Congress Checks In On Modernizing Government Technology Act Progress

NextGov, March 12, 2018

Lawmakers on Wednesday will get a mini-state of the union for federal information technology and hear progress made under the Modernization Government Technology Act.

Two House Oversight and Government Reform subcommittees will hear about governmentwide IT modernization plans and persistent issues in buying and implementing IT from a slate of IT officials. Government Accountability Office IT Management Issues Director David Powner, Office of Management and Budget Deputy Director Margaret Weichert, General Service Administration Deputy Assistant Commissioner Bill Zielinski and Homeland Security Department Assistant Secretary for the Office of Cybersecurity and Communications Jeanette Manfra are scheduled to attend.

The MGT Act became law in December as part of the annual defense authorization bill. Focused on updating aging systems, the law creates a central fund that agencies can borrow from and working capital funds where they can stash savings to pay for future IT projects. OMB issued guidance Feb. 27 to agencies for using the provision in the law and announced federal CIO Suzette Kent will lead the board that runs the Technology Modernization Fund.

It's Official, OPM Has A Permanent Leader

The last time the Office of Personnel Management has a permanent director was in 2015 before Katherine Archuleta resigned after the data breaches that compromised more than 21.5 million federal employees and applicants. The Senate on Wednesday approved nominee Jeff Pon by voice vote. He was nominated in September. Kathleen McGettigan has been serving as acting director.

Homeland Security Inches Closer to Reauthorization

The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on Wednesday passed the DHS

Authorization Act, which includes provisions to establish a bug bounty program, create cyber talent exchanges, and would elevate and rename the department's cyber unit the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. But a provision designed to help election security didn't make it through. Sens. James Lankford, R-Okla., and Kamala Harris, D-Calif., withdrew the Secure Elections Act, an amendment that would authorize the department to share cyber threat information with state election officials unless the Homeland Security secretary has a written, compelling reason not to. And the Senate still needs to work out some jurisdictional issues.

If Record Players Can Be Cool Again...

Legislation directing the Energy Department, intelligence community and national laboratories to look at analog options—or retro approaches—for securing the power grid is advancing in the Senate. The Securing Energy Infrastructure Act passed a Senate committee by voice vote and is included in the text of the 2018 Intelligence Authorization Act awaiting consideration now. An identical companion bill is still in committee in the House.

Tell Us About Your Vulnerabilities

Sen. Ted Lieu, D-Calif., last week wrote a letter to White House Cybersecurity Coordinator Rob Joyce asking whether Congress will get a copy of the Vulnerability Equities Process report—a summary of how the government decides whether to disclose when a software bug is found or keep it for intelligence gathering purposes. Lieu also asked whether the first report will include a report of 2017 activities and what authorities the VEP director has to compel agency compliance.

Senate Moving Forward On FOSTA

A controversial bill aimed at curbing online sex-trafficking that passed the House Feb. 27 is scheduled for a vote in the Senate on Monday. The Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act would allow states and victims to sue websites that are "knowingly assisting, supporting or facilitating a violation" of federal anti-sex trafficking laws, but the tech community argues the bill could open companies to frivolous lawsuits. The current version of FOSTA drew renewed criticism from tech groups as lawmakers amended the language to mirror the bill's stricter Senate counterpart, which has stalled in the upper chamber since Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., placed a hold on the bill in November.

Procrastinating on Political Ads

The Federal Election Commission delayed a vote on a rulemaking measure that would regulate expressly political advertisements online. The proposal looks similar to the Honest Ads Act, a Senate bill that would require web platforms like Facebook, Google and Twitter to disclose who pays for political ads posted on their sites in the wake of Russian meddling in the 2016 election. Initially introduced by

Sens. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., Mark Warner, D-Va., and John McCain, R-Ariz., the bill remains stagnated without Republican support.

Budget hearings dominate most of the week but there are few other tech hearings to watch for.

Wednesday morning the House Science, Space and Technology committee checks in with the national labs. A House Energy and Commerce committee examines legislation focused on cybersecurity and emergency response. In the afternoon, a House Armed Services subcommittee hears budget requests from Defense Department science and technology divisions, including the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

Aaron Boyd contributed to this article.

How To Improve Federal Cybersecurity Efforts

By Don Maclean

NextGov, March 12, 2018

Last year was another banner year for cyber hackers and bad actors. A recent report found that the number of data breaches reached 1,202 in 2017—a 50 percent increase since 2015.

Breaches on both public- and private-sector networks resulted in millions of Americans having their personal and financial data compromised. The private sector was particularly hit hard with the massive Equifax data breach impacting 145.5 million people.

But federal agencies also continue to face major challenges. The Transportation Security Administration and the National Security Agency both experienced serious breaches, even as the federal government has taken steps in recent years to help prevent such successful attacks. These ongoing cyber breaches suggest agencies aren't doing all they can within the established cybersecurity frameworks and initiatives that abound across government today.

The public sector can, and should, play a larger role in helping ensure massive breaches like those at Homeland Security Department, Office of Personnel Management and even Equifax don't happen again. It's time for federal chief information officers and IT professionals to start looking at these initiatives as more than just a guideline, but critical to the success of our nation's security. Here is how federal agencies can improve their cybersecurity efforts in the coming year.

Better Adhere to the Cybersecurity Executive Order

A major cyber-focused directive promulgated in 2017 was President Donald Trump's cybersecurity executive order. In it are three key elements that need to be taken seriously in the year ahead.

The first is accountability. The order holds agency heads accountable for "risk and magnitude of harm." So far, security has been a bureaucratic obstacle for most agencies, an empty exercise in administration, with little or no

consequence for failure. Holding agency heads accountable makes cybersecurity a top priority, and in theory, creates consequences for those who fall short.

The second element is upgrading the federal cyber workforce. Government agencies have far less flexibility than the private sector when negotiating salaries, but there are some advantages as well. Cybersecurity professionals in the government, particularly in the military and intelligence communities, are on the front lines of protecting our nation, which serves as a motivational factor in the workplace. Also, because cybersecurity (like all technology) changes rapidly, ongoing training and education are essential. Cybersecurity professionals are curious by nature; reward active minds with education. Additionally, in some environments, cybersecurity folks can legally work in offensive operations, which is a fascinating opportunity not regularly available in the corporate world.

Third is the emphasis of modernization, an effort often assumed to diminish security concerns. However, recent survey results show a surprising, and sometimes controversial, reaction from chief information security officers. Many believe that while modernization is an overall boon, it can actually complicate security concerns. For instance, the move to the cloud is a key element in modernization and in the long run will improve the security posture of most government systems. In the short term, however, CISOs will need to adjust to the reality of new ways of operating that will take time and patience.

Update Priorities Based on Current and Future Technology Trends

Adoption and execution of federal cybersecurity guidelines can move the federal government closer toward a stronger cyber posture. To start, agency CIOs should focus on the basics. They can do this by identifying assets such as systems, networks, data, devices, applications; knowing where data resides, lives, and goes; knowing its sensitivity levels and privacy requirements; standardizing and documenting system configurations; and implementing a stringent patch management program.

On the other end of the spectrum from the basics is staying current. History shows that bad actors are early adopters, and tend to use new technology as soon as possible. If your agency doesn't move ahead, your adversaries will zoom past you. Look at machine learning solutions. Stay on top of developments in blockchain. Wrestle with IoT solutions. Be a moving target.

Streamline the IT Acquisition Process

Agency CIOs should look to industry partners to make the most out of their people, processes, and resources. Is your security budget really inadequate, or can you reallocate funds to make it more effective? Typically, too much money goes to bureaucratic assessment efforts. Agencies should look to automate wherever possible. More importantly, don't

just shelve IT products, system assessments, and metrics reports. Use what you've paid for, and act on the results and recommendations from those efforts.

Agencies are going to continue to face attacks from hackers. In all likelihood, 2018 will be just as challenging as 2017. That's why it's important to leverage the frameworks in place to face these ongoing and evolving challenges head on, and we can improve the nation's cybersecurity posture together.

Don Maclean is the chief cybersecurity technologist for DLT Solutions.

To Defend Against Hostile Nations, America Needs Fierce Cyberpower

By Michael Hayden

The Hill, March 12, 2018

The "Russia story" is big news here in Washington, rightly consuming a lot of the oxygen around town, but there are also some important subtexts at work in the Russia plot line. Like, what should be the ground rules for any future confrontation in the cyber domain?

Three weeks ago, in front of the Senate Intelligence Committee, National Security Agency Director Mike Rogers easily joined consensus with the rest of America's intelligence leadership that the Russians interfered in the 2016 election and were expected to do so again this year and in 2020. The collective intelligence leadership also conceded that they had not been given specific presidential direction to do much about it.

Last week, Rogers pretty much repeated that, this time in his other role as commander of the U.S. Cyber Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He then talked about why we are failing to change Russia's (or any adversary's) behavior: "If we don't change the dynamic here, this is going to continue ... This is something that will be sustained over time." We haven't "changed the calculus or the behavior," he added, and our adversaries "haven't paid a price ... that's sufficient to get them to change their behavior."

Rogers is leaving NSA and Cyber Command shortly and, two days after this testimony, his successor, Army Lt. Gen. Paul Nakasone, was in front of the same Senate Armed Services Committee being asked many of the same questions and delivering many of the same answers. Talking about cyber adversaries like Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, Nakasone observed: "Right now, they do not think that much will happen. They don't fear us. That is not good."

"Our adversaries have not seen our response in sufficient detail to change their behavior," he concluded, echoing Rogers. They each would have been able to further develop their concerns and potential responses in closed session with the committee but, even at the unclassified level, it's pretty clear what they are getting at.

The Russian assault on America was a given, of course. Cyber espionage (the theft of the DNC's and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta's emails) helped enable a covert influence campaign against the American election. Better cybersecurity to protect American information was needed, as were better responses to more diffuse threats like fake news, botnets and Russian manipulation of social media. And, obviously, the same could be said about defending industrial control systems and critical infrastructure.

With their strong cyber backgrounds, both Rogers and Nakasone know that the cyber domain gives near-crushing advantage to the offense. Last year the Defense Science Board predicted that this imbalance would last at least through the next decade despite the best efforts to bolster cyber defenses and to bake resiliency into important systems.

So, in their testimony, Rogers and Nakasone were suggesting something more than classic defense and better manning the perimeter (so to speak) to prevent penetrations. In one sense their comments echoed what, in the physical combat domains, is called "counter battery" or "suppressive" fires, which means using your weapons to make an adversary less capable of using his. In effect, using your offensive power to reduce his offensive capacity. In nuclear strategy, we called these "counter force strikes" and, here, one can picture disabling troll farms or botnets, although — given the ubiquity of cyber capability — counter force in the cyber domain could quickly resemble whack-a-mole when dealing with a determined enemy.

In the nuclear realm we also had "counter value strikes," holding at risk not an enemy's nuclear forces but other things he held dear. When Rogers talks about changing our adversaries' calculus and their paying a price, and when Nakasone observes that they don't fear us, the cyber commanders are squarely here in their thinking. Indeed, Rogers has been pushing a robust theory of cyber deterrence in his public commentary for several years now.

Thanks to great theoreticians like Hermann Kahn during the nuclear era, thoughts like these were woven into a complex doctrine of strategic deterrence, so effective that it remained theoretical and never had to be put to the test. Cyber conflict has been different. Legitimate state espionage remains an active and accepted international practice in this domain, and some states go even further to spy for raw commercial advantage. We have also seen uses beyond espionage that have included broad information warfare and even physical damage. The destructive North Korea attack on Sony Pictures in 2014 and various Iranian assaults against financial services come to mind.

Rather than just warn and help defend, Rogers and Nakasone now want the authority under a simple, agile command structure to "shoot back" to defend or deter, to either disable or punish an aggressor. They want to operate secretly and routinely in the cyber domain by creating a legal

and policy zone that authorizes robust, sometimes destructive responses, well above normal peacetime competition but below what we would define as the threshold of conventional conflict and open interstate war.

That's quite an ask, but other nations like Iran, North Korea, China and Russia seem to routinely operate in this band. Indeed, Russian doctrine assumes constant conflict there. And if we do not make a similar decision, much of America's cyber combat power will remain in the barn and unused against threats like Vladimir Putin's and others.

America has spent a fortune to have such capabilities at the ready. Now what is needed is will — and clear policy and guidance for folks like Rogers and Nakasone. That was the message that the new and the outgoing commanders were sending. And it had meaning and implications well beyond just today and the Russians.

Gen. Michael Hayden is a former director of the CIA and of the National Security Agency, and a visiting professor in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. His forthcoming book, "The Assault on Intelligence: American National Security in an Age of Lies," is due out later this year.

Hackers Should Be Pumped About Gas Station Security Flaws

Researchers from Kaspersky Lab have found software vulnerabilities that deliver access to more than 1,000 gas stations around the world.

By Alfred Ng

CNET News, March 12, 2018

Add gas stations to the long list of everyday places and things no longer considered secure, joining hospitals, cars and televisions, to name just a few.

Kaspersky Lab released research on gas station vulnerabilities last month, pointing to more than 1,000 gas stations, from the US to India, that were open to cyberattacks. The problem stems from gas station pumps connected to the internet with default passwords that owners couldn't change and controls that give an attacker complete access to the machine.

On Friday, Kaspersky Lab senior security researcher Ido Naor and Israeli security researcher Amihai Neiderman presented their full breakdown of the issues with gas station security, during Kaspersky's Security Analyst Summit in Cancun, Mexico.

Their research showed that an attacker can change gas prices, steal credit card information logged on the pumps, get license plate numbers, steal gas, adjust temperature monitors and more.

"When we have root access, we can do anything we want," Neiderman said.

The attackers don't even need to be anywhere near your local gas station, Naor said. They can do it all remotely because these gas stations are connected online with a weak password, he said.

The online software comes from Orpak Systems, a fuel management company acquired by North Carolina-based Gilbarco Veeder-Root last May. According to Orpak, its software is installed in more than 35,000 gas stations around the world. Orpak put its guides online, showing technical details including passwords and screenshots of how to access its interface.

Orpak said the vulnerabilities were not relevant to its customers, as its gas stations in the US are in areas with no retail access and within closed corporate networks.

"Orpak has implemented software patches and upgrades, and sites where there may be vulnerabilities have been notified to implement additional IT security measures to reduce or eliminate risks," Aviv Tal, a spokesman for the company said in an email.

The guides and the gas stations were originally online for the sake of convenience. Several of the guides have since been removed, but we were able to independently find them through a quick Google search.

The vulnerabilities highlight the issues behind internet-of-things devices, which have been widely criticized for lack of security. Hackers have been able to launch massive cyberattacks because of unsecured webcams and DVRs. But with a gas station, the risks for a dangerous attack are much higher, Naor said.

In an extreme scenario, a hacker could adjust the pressure and temperatures in the tank, potentially causing an explosion, he said.

The trouble could be more mundane, too.

"You would have no idea that your little gas station could be remotely shut down, and your entire fleet is now grounded," Naor said.

Naor and Neiderman said they contacted the vendors in 2017, but were mostly ignored. It's likely that these vulnerabilities are still out there, Neiderman said. The machines are out of date, sometimes more than a decade old, and so is the software, he added.

"When we looked at the code, it doesn't appear that they have any real updating mechanisms," Neiderman said. "Pretty early on when we started talking to them, they ghosted us."

The US Military Could Begin Drafting 40-year-old Hackers

By Bryan Clark

The Next Web, March 13, 2018

The National Commission on Military, National and Public Service has begun seeking feedback on a host of

possible changes to the way it could one day draft young men and women for military service. Currently, the "selective service requirements" preclude certain men and women, specifically those over a certain age, from participating.

But that could soon change.

A document set to be published in the Federal Register later this week outlines a series of possible tweaks to selective service requirements, including allowing men and women with in-demand skill sets (medical, dental, nursing, language, cybersecurity, and certain STEM occupations) to be drafted, regardless of age or gender.

Not unlike the private sector, the military is facing a skills shortage in recruiting and training the modern soldier. It's hard to compete with six figure salaries in the peaceful tech mecca that is Silicon Valley, after all. For the military, and its already near-record low enlistment across all branches, this presents a unique set of problems. And options, from the looks of it, include all things up to, and including, reinstating the draft.

Only this draft would be unlike any we've seen previously.

From 1940 until 1973, the United States enforced a Roosevelt-era law known as the Selective Training and Service Act. The draft, as it was commonly known. And it was a spectacle in its own right. Young men aged 18 to 25 gathered around a radio (or a television, later) and waited to hear if their name was one of millions selected to provide additional manpower during conflicts (like WWII and Vietnam) or peacetime.

If selected, the cadet would report at a specific date and time to basic training, where he was handed a gun and briefly taught who to point it at. That ended in 1973, when the military switched to voluntary service — although 18 to 25 year-old men are still required to register, just in case.

As we transition to a world where wars are increasingly fought with keyboards, not boots on the ground, the most alpha of all alpha males could soon look to curmudgeonly old bronies plucked from the depths for 4-chan and tasked with securing our nation from enemies both foreign and domestic. For now though, it's just a debate — one in which you can speak your mind on by submitting comments to: national.commission.on.service.info@mail.mil

On a side note, I once melted the face off of a GI Joe with a magnifying glass, burying him in a shallow grave in the backyard in an attempt to conceal the crime. That GI Joe, I presume, is now rolling over in his grave.

Your Identity Is For Sale On The Dark Web For Less Than \$1,200

By Alyssa Newcomb

[NBC News](#), March 12, 2018

Passwords for individual online banking accounts sell on the dark web for an average of \$160.15.

If that seems pricey, there's plenty of other personal information available for much less.

Getting in the front door of a person's Airbnb account will cost hackers about \$7.87. Uber credentials are a bargain at \$7. And if cybercriminals get hungry, they can get a GrubHub food delivery login for about \$9.16.

Those are the going rates compiled across three popular dark web marketplaces by Top10VPN, an online security and privacy education company.

"What really struck me [is] how everything has a value on the dark web," said Simon Migliano, head of research and operations at Top10VPN. "It brought home how opportunistic this really is."Related

The average person has at least a dozen online accounts, ranging from email and Facebook to online shopping, food delivery and banking. Add up all of those accounts and the typical internet user's identity is worth about \$1,200 to hackers, according to Migliano's calculations.

Nicolas Christin, an associate research professor in computer science and engineering at Carnegie Mellon, who is not affiliated with the research, told NBC News that the prices appear to be similar to what he's seen for sale on the dark web.

"Unfortunately, they don't tell us much: We don't know if people are actually buying these items. We don't know anything about the quality of the items in question," he wrote in an email.

On the dark web, Migliano described a system that could be likened to eBay or Craigslist, but for criminals. His team used automated and manual data collection during the week of Feb. 5 to build their index, which focuses on listings for American and British accounts.

The research focuses on three of the most popular places offering sensitive information on the dark web: Dream, Point and Wall Street Market. These platforms aren't accessible to the average internet user and don't show up in search engines. They often require particular software or special access, and hide users' identities — making them perfect for marketplaces that traffic in personal data, drugs and child pornography.

While a criminal wouldn't know for certain if the credentials they were buying actually worked or would lead to something of more value, Migliano said the covert online marketplaces are set up like any other online buying platform.

Sellers usually have ratings and reviews, so "as a would-be fraudster, you would want to be buying from a highly rated seller," Migliano said.

After criminals get the credentials to a person's account, whether it's their email or online shopping account, Migliano said they will then snoop around, hoping to find

more clues that could allow them to take over their target's identity.

"The problem is, people usually reuse their passwords," he said.

Here's why that's bad: If a hacker has access to a person's online dating account, they could then try that password on their target's email or banking accounts, opening the door to wider identity theft.

"Our research is a stark reminder of just how easy it is to get hold of personal info on the dark web and the sheer variety of routes that fraudsters can take to get hold of your money," Migliano said.

While the idea of cybercriminals forking over a few bucks to weasel their way into a person's online accounts sounds scary, there are a couple simple cybersecurity practices that can keep everyone safe.

Robert Siciliano, a security analyst with digital security firm Hotspot Shield, said it is important to use unique passwords for each account and to change them regularly. Two-factor authentication, where a code is sent to a phone and then used to log in, can also keep users safe.

"Because billions of passwords are in circulation it is essential that consumers do not reuse passwords," Siciliano said. Because on the dark web, "every aspect of personal identifying information is up for grabs."

Week Ahead: NSA Nominee Heads Before Senate Intelligence Committee

By Morgan Chalfant

The Hill, March 12, 2018

President Trump's choice to helm the National Security Agency will face lawmakers on the Senate Intelligence Committee for his second confirmation hearing on Thursday.

Lt. Gen. Paul Nakasone, the Army's current cyber chief, was unanimously approved by the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday to serve in the dual-hat role as NSA director and commander of U.S. Cyber Command.

Nakasone is sure to face a flurry of questions about cyber threats to the United States, the U.S. intelligence mission, and the possible separation of NSA and Cyber Command, after Trump formally elevated the latter into its own warfighting unit last year.

Nakasone is likely to be grilled by lawmakers on Russian interference in the 2016 election and potential threats to the 2018 midterm elections, a topic that figured prominently during his first confirmation hearing before the Armed Services panel.

Nakasone, who has been received warmly by both Democrats and Republicans, acknowledged at that hearing that foreign adversaries including Russia have not faced steep enough penalties in cyberspace to change their malicious behavior.

Nakasone's open confirmation hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee will take place Thursday morning and could be followed by a closed-door session with lawmakers, the committee announced Friday.

Should he be confirmed, Nakasone will replace Adm. Michael Rogers, who is expected to retire from his post later this year.

Meanwhile, Armed Services senators will hear from Nakasone and other U.S. military cyber commanders on Tuesday about the cyber posture of their respective branches. The hearing will feature the top cyber commanders of the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy.

Those hankering for some kind of response from Congress to the massive Equifax data breach might actually get their wish in the coming week.

The Senate is poised to soon vote on a measure requiring credit-reporting firms to offer free credit freezes to consumers who request them, which is included in a broader banking reform package.

Equifax weathered massive criticism for its response to the breach last year, which exposed sensitive personal data on more than 145 million U.S. consumers. The cyberattack has triggered efforts in Washington to create a national standard for breach notification, in addition to other legislative proposals.

While the measure requiring free credit freezes is viewed as a response to the Equifax breach, Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.) told *The Wall Street Journal* that he wished it did more to rein in credit-reporting firms.

"They have all of our personal information," Warner said. "And there are no clear standards and clear penalties."

The Senate has teed up a cloture vote on the broader package, S. 2155, which eases a number of Dodd-Frank financial regulations, on Monday evening.

Next week could also bring more movement on a measure reauthorizing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The measure includes a number of provisions related to the department's cybersecurity mission.

The bill advanced the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on Thursday and notably includes language reorganizing and renaming Homeland Security's lead office for cybersecurity and infrastructure protection, the National Protection and Programs Directorate.

What the bill does not include, however, are measures addressing election security despite growing fears about future Russian interference. Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.) planned to introduce an amendment to the bill addressing the issue with Sen. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.), though he was forced to withdraw it at the last minute after receiving complaints from some state-level election officials.

Lankford signaled he might still offer a revised amendment to the bill, which can now move to the Senate floor.

The House has already passed stand-alone bills reauthorizing Homeland Security and renaming the cyber office.

Port Of Longview Hit With Major Cyberattack

Longview (WA) Daily News, March 12, 2018

The Port of Longview was recently victimized by a cyber attack that may have affected hundreds of past and current employees and dozens of vendors.

The FBI notified the port of the attack on Feb. 1, according to an internal memo obtained Monday by The Daily News.

However, the FBI told the port additional details about the attack are "classified," according to the memo. The date on the FBI's initial report on the attack was Jan. 18, 2018, the memo said.

An investigation led by SecureWorks, the port's cybersecurity firm, found the attack had the potential to affect 370 past and current employees — including past Port of Kalama employees — and 47 vendors. (The Port of Longview used to manage Port of Kalama employees' benefits.) The attack may also have affected 22 longshoremen, the memo said.

Investigators traced the attack to internet service provider addresses in Russia, Liberia and Kazakhstan, according to the memo.

"The port has no indication that personal information was compromised," port spokeswoman Brooke Hendrickson said in a prepared statement to The Daily News.

The port is mailing notification letters to potentially affected individuals and companies on Tuesday, Hendrickson said. In addition, internal staff and 14 affected longshoremen have already been verbally notified, she said.

"As you can imagine, this process was time- and labor-intensive, but we wanted to be certain about who may have been affected and what information about them was involved," Hendrickson said, explaining why the port didn't immediately notify potential victims. "We are notifying individuals as quickly as possible after we completed our investigation."

Reached by phone Monday afternoon, the president of the local longshore union said he was unaware of the attack.

"This is the first I've heard of it," said Billy Roberts, president of the Longview-based International Longshore and Warehouse Union 21.

Mark Wilson, the Port of Kalama's executive director, declined to comment.

Hendrickson said the port's main investigation is complete, but port officials still are waiting to receive a final report.

As a precaution, the port is providing one year of credit and identity theft monitoring for potentially affected individuals.

After notifying SecureWorks about a potential security breach, the company's cybersecurity experts developed a plan that included reviewing all server logs, other logs and data available, according to the memo. The company also installed network scanning software.

The intruder's motive was unclear, according to the memo.

The investigation found that a number of servers were compromised, but it could not definitely determine whether any data or information was taken. As a result, investigators assumed that data was stolen, the memo said.

The investigation was able to confirm that two administrator accounts were hacked.

The port's cyber insurance carrier, Beasley, also required the port to engage the Baker Hostetler law firm in a three-way contract to preserve attorney-client privilege, the memo said.

Baker Hostetler, which has a relationship with the FBI, shared the IP address and malware information with the agency's officials, but did not receive any information in return, the memo said.

The port has cybersecurity insurance and notified its broker on Feb. 5, according to the memo.

Estimated costs to the port are roughly \$60,000, the memo said.

It was not immediately clear Monday when the port expects to receive a final report on the attack.

Get Hit By Internet Crime? Good Luck Getting Help From Some Local Police

By Tim Johnson

McClatchy, March 12, 2018

In practically the blink of an eye, Maggie Irizarry lost about \$1,300 to thieves. But the culprits weren't robbers who broke into her Miami home. They were hackers who connived their way onto her Lenovo laptop.

Because of that, local police balked at getting involved. Irizarry's only recourse was to plead for mercy with her bank and credit card company in hopes of recovering her loss.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans are victims of cybercrime every year. Yet only 15 percent of cyber fraud victims ever report the crimes to law enforcement, the FBI says. Many victims — those who have lost hundreds or thousands of dollars — feel they have nowhere to turn.

The truth is they often do not. Most local and state law enforcement agencies are not equipped to track down cyber crooks. The FBI is swamped and must prioritize big cases.

"It's a huge problem," said Nick Selby, a Texas police detective and information security consultant. "It's difficult for local law enforcement because we don't have the training."

International cyber gangs prey upon U.S. victims by hacking their computers to obtain credit card and Social

Security numbers to defraud banks and retail outlets. But other crimes are also on the rise.

"They are things like, 'My ex is tracking me with spyware on my phone,' or 'My neighbor has hijacked my wireless and is doing illegal things.' There's nobody to tell about this," said Michael K. Hamilton, founder and president of Critical Informatics, an information security firm that operates out of Bremerton, Washington.

Local and state law enforcement agencies often are ill-equipped to investigate digital crimes, which can originate across state lines or outside of the United States. Prosecutors sometimes hesitate to take on complicated cases with low conviction rates. At the national level, a rise in cases inundates the FBI, the lead federal agency on cyberattacks and crimes.

This threat is now coming at us from all sides.

Christopher Wray, FBI director

"This threat is now coming at us from all sides," FBI Director Christopher Wray said March 7 at Boston College. "We're worried — at the FBI and with our partners — about a wider range of threat actors, from multinational cyber syndicates and insider threats to hacktivists. And we're concerned about a wider gamut of methods..."

For Irizarry, a chemical engineer who worked at the Environmental Protection Agency before her retirement, the threat came one day when her laptop screen turned bright red.

"It gave me a message to call Microsoft. Dumb me, I supposedly call 'Microsoft.' It was an 800 number," Irizarry said. "I panicked a bit."

The call responder said he would fix Irizarry's computer for \$300, so she turned over her credit card number and gave the man remote electronic access to her hard drive.

Later, her phone rang. The callers said they'd overcharged her credit card by \$1,000.

"They started screaming at me, saying they were going to be fired because they made this huge mistake," she said. Then they asked her to go to a CVS drugstore "and get \$1,000 in gift cards in \$100 denominations," she said. "At that point, I figured out that they were not Microsoft."

At the urging of a friend, Irizarry called the FBI, and an agent told her to alert her bank and credit card company. Then she went to city police.

"The guy said, 'I cannot take your complaint.' I said, 'Why not?' 'Because you don't know who did this,'" she said. She said the man had an Indian accent, and the officer surmised that the internet scam operated from India.

"They do this all the time, he said, and we don't have jurisdiction over this. You don't have a name or an address," Irizarry recalled.

Luckily, the bank reimbursed her \$1,000 loss and so did the credit card company. She held \$500 in Apple gift cards

which she had bought but not yet turned over to the fraudsters.

At the urging of the FBI, Irizarry filed an electronic complaint with the bureau's Internet Crime Complaint Center, a national clearinghouse. The center received 298,728 complaints with total losses in excess of \$1.3 billion in 2016, the latest year for which statistics are available.

While the FBI sorts through and bundles even the smallest internet crimes, active investigations concentrate only when losses are large.

There's just too much cybercrime for them to look at anything below \$1 million.

James A. Lewis, Center for Strategic & International Studies

"We talked to one of the bigger field offices in the U.S. and they said, 'We have a million-dollar threshold.' There's just too much cybercrime for them to look at anything below \$1 million," James A. Lewis, head of the technology policy program at the Center for Strategic & International Studies, said at a Feb. 21 event.

In a follow-up interview this week, Lewis said local police departments often have only one or two cyber specialists, and prosecutors and judges may not have significant expertise.

"There's a reluctance, I think, below the federal level to take on what can be very tough cases," Lewis said.

Selby, the Texas detective, said local police departments will take a strong interest if a cyber case involves terrorism, human trafficking or child pornography.

Can't turn your computer on or off? Is it acting up, running slow, opening pages you didn't click, or displaying pop-ups constantly? There's a good chance your computer's been hacked or infected with a virus. Here's what to do. Federal Trade Commission www.consumer.ftc.gov

"If you got your identity stolen and you're looking for more than a police report, no, you're out of luck," Selby said, adding that the matter is partly generational. "You still have generations of chiefs of police who are in their 60s. They are not really focused on this."

Some smaller departments have hired experts with formidable cyber forensics skills.

"There have been cases where I've been able to trace activity back to Eastern Europe," said Anthony Kava, a digital forensics examiner and special deputy at the Pottawattamie County Sheriff's Office in western Iowa. But FBI support is hard to obtain.

There's a long queue to get things done because everyone wants their (the FBI's) assistance.

Anthony Kava, Pottawattamie County Sheriff's Office

"There's a long queue to get things done because everyone wants their (the FBI's) assistance," Kava said.

At the Miami-Dade County Police Department, which is separate from the Miami City Police that declined to handle

Irizarry's matter, officers are instructed to take all cyber complaints, said Sgt. Armando Borrego of the Organized Fraud Intelligence Squad. But cybercrimes that originate abroad are problematic.

"What recourse do we have? Our jurisdiction is Miami-Dade County. How do we put somebody behind the computer? Honestly, we can't," Borrego said.

Even the FBI struggles with getting hit by cybercrime.

Last month, the FBI alerted citizens to beware of criminals sending emails impersonating its Internet Crime Complaint Center, suggesting to victims that they could receive restitution if they provided more information about themselves. The bogus emails contained an attachment.

"The text file contained malware which was designed to further victimize the recipient," an FBI release said.

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Canadian Man Accused Of Helping Drug Cartels With Encrypted Phones In FBI Bust

By Cristina Maza

Newsweek, March 12, 2018

The CEO of a tech company specializing in encrypted phones was arrested because his devices allegedly helped international drug cartels and other criminal organizations conduct business.

Vincent Ramos was charged on Thursday with racketeering, conspiracy to conduct enterprise affairs, aiding and abetting, and conspiracy to distribute narcotics, among other charges. The Canadian national heads the Vancouver-based company Phantom Secure.

The FBI alleges that a joint investigation with law enforcement officials in Australia and Canada determined that the phones Ramos produced were made explicitly for evading law enforcement. The criminal complaint filed against him said that the company advertised its products directly to criminal organizations, including gangs like the Hells Angels. Ramos allegedly told undercover FBI agents last year that his company's products were made for drug trafficking.

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Police stand guard before the arrival of Hector "El Guero" Palma Salazar, member of the Sinaloa cartel at the international airport in Mexico City on June 15, 2016. PEDRO PARDO/AFP/Getty Images

"Phantom Secure operated the encrypted Phantom Secure network, which used Phantom Secure devices to send and receive encrypted messages in furtherance of transnational criminal activity," according to the criminal complaint.

The company removes cameras, microphones, GPS, and other tracking devices from its phones. It also uses the common encryption technology pretty good privacy (PGP) to make it impossible for law enforcement to access and read

messages, according to the complaint. What's more, the company allegedly also had the ability to clean phones of data remotely when one of the phone's users was arrested, making it harder for law enforcement officials to collect evidence.

The Phantom Secure devices are frequently used by the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico, according to the complaint. The cartel is infamous for international drug trafficking, money laundering, kidnappings, and bribery.

Also on Thursday, Federal prosecutors in San Diego indicted 75 people associated with the Sinaloa cartel for drug trafficking and money laundering. Investigators seized \$6 million in cash and hundreds of pounds of drugs like fentanyl, heroin, cocaine, and marijuana as part of their ongoing investigation.

OTHER DHS NEWS

US Sets New Record For Censoring, Withholding Gov't Files

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) – The federal government censored, withheld or said it couldn't find records sought by citizens, journalists and others more often last year than at any point in the past decade, according to an Associated Press analysis of new data.

The calculations cover eight months under President Donald Trump, the first hints about how his administration complies with the Freedom of Information Act.

The surge of people who sought records but ended up empty-handed was driven by the government saying more than ever it could not find a single page of requested files and asserting in other cases that it would be illegal under U.S. laws to release the information.

People who asked for records under the Freedom of Information Act received censored files or nothing in 78 percent of 823,222 requests, a record over the past decade. When it provided no records, the government said it could find no information related to the request in a little over half those cases.

It turned over everything requested in roughly one of every five FOIA requests, according to the AP analysis.

Records requests can take months – even years – to get fulfilled. Even then, the government censored documents in nearly two-thirds of cases when it turned over anything.

The federal government also spent \$40.6 million last year in legal fees defending its decisions to withhold federal files, also a record. That included the time when a U.S. judge ruled against the AP and other news organizations asking for details about who and how much the FBI paid to unlock the iPhone used by a gunman in a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. When the government loses in court, it

sometimes must pay the winner's attorney's fees. For example, the New York Times was awarded \$51,910 from the CIA in May in a fight over records about chemical weapons in Iraq.

It was impossible, based on the government's own accounting, to determine whether researchers, journalists and others asked for records that did not actually exist or whether federal employees did not search hard enough before giving up. The government said it found nothing 180,924 times, an 18 percent increase over the previous year.

"Federal agencies are failing to take advantage of modern technology to store, locate and produce records in response to FOIA requests, and the public is losing out as a result," said Adam A. Marshall, the Knight Foundation litigation attorney at the Washington-based Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press.

He said citizens and others should try to precisely describe how they want filings cabinets, hard drives or email accounts searched, but "you shouldn't have to be an expert in records management just to submit a FOIA."

In other cases, the times the government said it would be illegal under other U.S. laws to release requested information nearly doubled to 63,749. Those laws include broad prohibitions against revealing details about U.S. intelligence activities or foreign governments, trade secrets, individual banking or tax records and more.

Many of those requests probably involved files related to the U.S. investigation into how Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election or the related grand jury investigations or about Trump's personal or business tax returns, said Kel McClanahan, a Washington lawyer who frequently sues the U.S. government for records. "How many people do you think asked for Trump's tax returns?" he asked.

A disturbing trend continued: In more than one-in-three cases, the government reversed itself when challenged and acknowledged that it had improperly tried to withhold pages. But people filed such appeals only 14,713 times, or about 4.3 percent of cases in which the government said it found records but held back some or all of the material.

The Trump administration, in a new report last week, noted that it received a record number of information requests last year. It said many agencies reduced their backlogs of overdue requests.

The administration also said it was directing federal agencies to improve the number of requests they process and do some more quickly.

Performance under the records law by the Trump administration has been a source of curiosity, since Trump has eschewed some of the common conventions of transparency. For example, the president has declined to release his personal tax returns or logs of official visitors to the White House, and ethics waivers granted to many of

Trump's political appointees do not include details about their former or current corporate clients.

But Trump is personally more accessible to reporters asking questions than President Barack Obama, and he released as many details about his medical records as previous presidents.

The Freedom of Information Act figures, released Friday, cover the actions of 116 departments and agencies during the fiscal 2017, which ended Sept. 30. The highest number of requests went to the departments of Homeland Security, Justice, Defense, Health and Human Services, and Agriculture, along with the National Archives and Records Administration and Veterans Administration.

The administration released its figures ahead of Sunshine Week, when news organizations promote open government and freedom of information.

Under the records law, citizens and foreigners can compel the U.S. government to turn over copies of federal records for no or little cost. Anyone who seeks information through the law is generally supposed to get it unless disclosure would hurt national security, violate personal privacy, or expose business secrets or confidential decision-making in certain areas.

One of a package of stories marking Sunshine Week, an annual celebration of access to public information.

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GLOBAL MEDIA

Take Refugees Or Face Visa Caps, EU To Tell Other Countries: Die Welt

Reuters, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Q&A: Australia's Immigration Rate Should Be Cut In Half, Bob Carr Says

Former foreign affairs minister says the benefits of immigration could be preserved but effects managed by slowing down rate

By Anne Davies

The Guardian (UK), March 12, 2018

The former foreign affairs minister Bob Carr has called for Australia to cut its immigration rate in half, declaring that the country's experiment of running the fastest rate of immigration in the world was an experiment that was failing.

Monday's ABC Q&A program concentrated on just one issue: Australia's immigration levels and the pressures on our cities. As well as Bob Carr, the panel included experts on housing, development, the environment and migration policy.

The audience included over a third of people drawn from the growth hotspots in Sydney, who gave voice to concerns about traffic congestion, overdevelopment and pressure on schools and services.

A faultline quickly developed among the panellists over whether it was a question of the level of immigration or the failure of governments to adequately plan and invest in the infrastructure needed to cope with the population.

As premier of New South Wales between 1995 and 2005, Carr famously declared that "Sydney was full". At that stage the city's population was approaching four million and his government was under pressure over transport and infrastructure.

But while Sydney was one of the great melting pots of the world, which Carr acknowledged – "37% of the population of Sydney was born overseas, we celebrate it" – he said even immigrants were asking whether Australia could achieve the same benefits from migration at a less dramatic pace.

"Do we really want to be adding a million to our population every three and a half years? Would it be such a departure from God's eternal plan for this continent if we took six years about acquiring an extra million?" he asked.

Carr pointed to a poll – he did not say which one – which had shown that "74% of Australians think there is enough of us already".

But John Daley from the Grattan Institute argued strongly that the concern in Australian cities was not about levels of migration per se, but its impacts, such as skyrocketing house prices and congestion. He argued that Singapore had achieved relatively low levels of congestion on its roads by imposing unpalatable taxes to prevent people driving from into the city.

"Australia's transport system is not that bad," he said. There are plenty of roads, there are plenty of large roads, the issue is how much road space have we got relative to how many cars are trying to get around."

Tim Flannery from the Climate Council highlighted Australia's fragile environment. "We are a big country and Canada is a big country and Antarctica is a big continent as well – the habitability is the thing," he said.

"It's a big land but it is not a fertile land. We have to look at all of those factors as we grow. With the impacts of climate change, western Sydney will start feeling the heat because the heatwaves are getting longer, hotter and more frequent. The infrastructure we are building isn't fit for purpose for that future. And I think we will struggle."

Asked by a woman about the pressure on schools, Daley said planners had not envisaged that people with kids would live in the inner and middle rings of our cities. "I don't

think that people 15 years ago believed that there would be families. Now, things have changed. A lot more families are prepared to live there. And so we need to make sure that politicians get behind that and invest the money in schools."

The Grattan Institute has forecast that Victoria needs 220 new schools in the next 10 years, with 213 for NSW and nearly 200 for Queensland.

Carr pointed to the often hypocritical nature of politicians and business figures who call for heightened levels of immigration in the interests of economic growth but who were insulated from its effects by living in suburbs like Point Piper – where Malcolm Turnbull has his home

"Barry O'Farrell [a Liberal NSW premier] declared he was a great supporter of a big Australia, he wanted more ambitious immigration and one of his first acts was to cancel plans for highrise in his electorate along the north shore rail line."

Carr also asserted that migrants were pushing down wages. "We had the Reserve Bank tell us that wages are too low. There is not enough growth in wages. And the reason is, the reason is we've got extraordinarily high immigration as part of our economic system."

But Daley and another panellist, Dr Jay Song, disputed this. Daley said the consensus among economists was that skilled migration tended to push wages up.

Song said 60% were skilled migrants and Australian businesses needed them to address skills shortages.

But Daley conceded that migration did drive up house prices.

Jane Fitzgerald, from the NSW Property Council said the answer was to do the planning on jobs, transport and housing. She strongly agreed with the Reserve Bank paper that said the planning system had added more than \$498,000 to the price of each house.

One questioner asked why we had not developed high-speed rail links to regional centres such as Newcastle and Wollongong to encourage decentralisation. Daley said despite 117 years of official policy to do that, the record was 117 years of failure.

"If we think we're doing it because we are making Newcastle and Wollongong dormitory towns for Sydney, that is doable," he said. But he added that it would be better to increase the density in the middle rings of Sydney.

Flannery said the issue was marshalling enough resources in regional centres, and that even agricultural resources were often too thin to attract business to regional Australian towns.

Several people pointed to the importance of universities in activating these towns. Daley said the problem was employers who congregated in big cities closer to other service industries.

One young woman raised the issue of global population growth, which is forecast to reach 9.4 billion people by 2075.

She asked whether Australia had a moral obligation to accommodate some of them.

Daley agreed there was a moral imperative. "They probably will live much better lives if they come to Australia. That is not just because there are other options, it is because Australia has a whole series of existing high-quality institutions and by global standards is a genius for integrating migrants into our community."

But Carr said our obligation to the world was best expressed by us managing "this vast and beautiful continent" sustainably.

The better path was to become "so prosperous that through our overseas development assistance program we can be regarded as the most generous of the world's wealthy countries. And not least by running an aid program with a feature of family planning in it."

TERRORISM INVESTIGATIONS

Another Person Is Dead After Third Austin Package Explosion This Month

By Maya Salam

New York Times, March 12, 2018

One person was killed and two were injured in two separate blasts just miles apart in Austin, Tex., on Monday. In both attacks, the residents of the homes found a package outside their door that contained a powerful explosive device.

The Austin interim police chief, Brian Manley, held two news conferences on Monday, one after each blast, warning residents not to touch, move or handle any unexpected or suspicious packages. "Call 911," he said. "It's appropriate for residents to be concerned."

The earlier explosion, which occurred on Oldfort Hill Drive, was reported by neighbors at 6:44 a.m. Monday, and the police and emergency services personnel arrived shortly after, Chief Manley said. They found the two injured victims: a 17-year-old boy, who later died, and a woman, whose injuries were not thought to be life-threatening. The package had been brought inside, where it exploded.

At 11:50 a.m. local time, the Austin Police Department started to receive reports of a second explosion, on Galindo Street, just a few miles from the first blast.

Similar to the earlier blast, the victim, this time a 75-year-old woman, came outside, found the package, picked it up and it exploded, Mr. Manley said in the second news conference. Her injuries were significant, and she was in critical, stable condition.

Both attacks are believed to be linked to a blast at another Austin home on the morning of March 2, in which an exploding package killed Anthony Stephan House, 39. Both cases that resulted in deaths are being investigated as homicides, the authorities said.

"We heard the explosion, it sounded like fireworks," said Amalia Martinez, 38, who lives on Galindo Street, about four houses from Monday's second blast site, with her son and daughter.

Her son, Angel Chavez, said he saw an older woman being taken in an ambulance. "Her clothes were burned," he said.

The police knocked on doors and ordered residents to evacuate. Families remained out of their homes later in the day after the authorities sealed off the immediate neighborhood as part of their investigation. There was a large evacuation around the home on Oldfort Hill Drive as well.

The police were canvassing the neighborhoods and checking to see if any nearby residences had external video cameras.

"We are not going to tolerate this in Austin," Chief Manley said earlier on Monday. He was joined at the news conference by John Scata, F.B.I. special agent in charge in Austin; Allen Darilek, resident agent in charge for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives out of San Antonio; and members of the Austin Police Department's executive team. The investigation is being conducted as a joint operation between the agencies.

The police confirmed that both blasts on Monday and the March 2 blast were caused by improvised explosive devices, but did not reveal any more details about the explosives, to avoid compromising the integrity of the investigation. Though Chief Manley said they are "very powerful devices."

Investigators do not believe that any of the packages were delivered by the Post Office, UPS, FedEx or DHL. Instead, they think they were dropped off at the respective homes overnight, to be discovered by the residents in the morning.

The F.B.I. evidence recovery team is headed to Austin, along with the A.T.F. national response team, Chief Manley said. "There will be a very large post-blast investigation that will take place in this residence," he said.

The motives, though, are not yet known. Earlier Monday, Mr. Manley said that the police had not ruled out the possibility of the attacks being hate crimes, since the March 2 victim and the early morning victims on Monday were African-Americans. The victim in the second bombing of the day was Hispanic. Chief Manley said the police are not ruling out any motive that links the three cases. He also implored the community to come forward with any information.

A \$15,000 reward is being offered for information leading to the arrest of those responsible for Austin package bombings, Gov. Greg Abbott announced in a statement on Monday, adding that "the State of Texas will provide any resources necessary to ensure the safety of our citizens, and quickly bring those guilty to justice."

Another Explosion Rocks Texas Capital And Injures Woman

By Will Weissert And David Warren
Associated Press, March 12, 2018

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Investigators believe a package bomb that killed a teenager and wounded a woman in Austin on Monday is linked to a similar bombing that killed a man elsewhere in the city this month, and they're considering whether race was a factor because all of the victims were black.

Shortly after police Chief Brian Manley held a news conference in which he linked the Monday morning attack that killed a 17-year-old boy and injured a woman with a March 2 attack that killed a 39-year-old man, authorities rushed to the scene of another blast that badly injured a woman.

Authorities haven't said whether the most recent blast was also caused by a package bomb or if the victim, like those killed or injured in the two confirmed bombings, is black. Austin-Travis County EMS tweeted that the woman is in her 70s and was taken to Dell Seton Medical Center with potentially life-threatening injuries.

The explosions happened with hundreds of thousands of visitors in the city for the South by Southwest music, film and technology festival, and authorities urged the public to call the police if they receive any packages they aren't expecting. The explosions happened far from the festival's events, and there was no immediate word from organizers about additional safety precautions they were taking.

The three explosions occurred in different parts of east Austin. Monday's first explosion happened at a home near the city's Windsor Park neighborhood and about 12 miles (20 kilometers) from the home where the March 2 package bomb killed 39-year-old Anthony Stephan House. The March 2 blast was initially investigated as a suspicious death, but is now viewed as a homicide.

Monday's second explosion — the cause of which was still being investigated — happened in the Montopolis neighborhood, which is west of the airport and about five miles south of the day's first blast.

Manley said investigators believe the March 2 and Monday's first attack are related. In both cases, the packages were left overnight on the victims' doorsteps and were not mailed or sent by a delivery service. He said the U.S. Postal Service doesn't have a record of delivering the package to the home where Monday's explosion occurred, and that private carriers like UPS and FedEx also indicated that they had none, either.

"There are similarities that we cannot rule out that these two items are, in fact, related," Manley said.

Manley said investigators haven't determined a motive for the attacks, but it is possible that the victims could have been targeted because they are black.

"We don't know what the motive behind these may be," Manley said. "We do know that both of the homes that were the recipients of these packages belong to African-Americans, so we cannot rule out that hate crime is at the core of this. But we're not saying that that's the cause as well."

Special Agent Michelle Lee, a San Antonio-based spokesman for the FBI, said the agency "responded to both events" and was assisting Austin police, who were taking the lead on investigating. She said the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives was taking the lead on the federal investigation.

Manley said that a second package was discovered near the site of the initial Monday explosion and that some residents and media members were evacuated or pushed farther from the blast site as authorities determined whether it was a bomb.

Police didn't immediately identify the teenager killed Monday. Manley said the woman who was injured in that attack is a 40-year-old woman who remains hospitalized.

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Monday Explosions Jar Austin: If You See An Unmarked Package, Quickly Call 911

Austin (TX) Chronicle, March 12, 2018

The Austin Police Department is warning residents not to open any unexpected or suspicious packages after two explosions took place today, Mon., March 12, at two private residences. The first bomb went off this morning in East Austin, killing a 17-year-old man and injuring another woman.

Several hours later, APD responded to a second explosion on Galindo Street in Southeast Austin, which injured a 75-year-old woman. Today's bombings are similar to a March 2 incident that killed Anthony Stephan House after he opened an unmarked package at his house on Haverford Drive.

During a press conference this afternoon, Police Chief Brian Manley confirmed that APD believes the incidents are related and is asking residents to be hypervigilant of unexpected and/or unmarked packages. In the case that residents are confronted with such a package, Manley instructed people to call 911 immediately. Packages should not be touched; instead, Manley said to "go to the back of the residence and stay there" until law enforcement arrives to clear the area.

Due to a high level of calls, Manley noted that it may take officers a little while to arrive, but he said "we will respond."

As of now, APD has not assigned a motive to any case and Manley said APD is not ruling anything out in order to not limit the investigation. However, since the first two victims were black, and the 75-year-old woman was Latina, APD is also not ruling out that the attacks could be classified as hate crimes.

The U.S. Postal Service, which is one of many organizations partnering with APD in what Manley expects to be a lengthy investigation, has confirmed that these packages were not sent from their offices. Mayor Steve Adler, City Manager Spencer Cronk, and members of the FBI joined Manley for today's press conference, though only Manley spoke.

The ongoing South by Southwest festivities will not interfere with APD's investigation, and additional agencies including the Department of Public Safety have offered their services. Manley concluded his announcement with another reminder to not panic, but "be aware." He implored anyone with additional information to come forward. If you see a package, he reiterated: "Do not move it, do not touch it, call us."

This story has been updated. The 75-year-old woman in Southeast Austin did not die, as initially reported.

A note to readers: Bold and uncensored, The Austin Chronicle has been Austin's independent news source for over 36 years, expressing the community's political and environmental concerns and supporting its active cultural scene. Now more than ever, we need your support to continue supplying Austin with independent, free press. If real news is important to you, please consider making a donation of \$5, \$10 or whatever you can afford, to help keep our journalism on stands.

3rd Package Explosion Reported In Austin Hours After Blast That Killed Teen, Injured Woman

By Naheed Rajwani

Dallas Morning News, March 12, 2018

Last updated at 5:50 p.m.: Revised to include information from Dallas police.

A second explosion was reported Monday in Austin, just hours after a package bomb killed a teenager and seriously injured one other person and 10 days after another fatal blast.

About 6:45 a.m., first responders were sent to the 4800 block of Oldfort Hill Drive in east Austin to investigate an explosion inside a home.

A 17-year-old boy was pronounced dead at the scene. A woman in her 40s was taken to a hospital with serious — but not life-threatening — injuries, officials said.

Galindo Street is completely blocked off, but Gilbert Rendon described the explosion. He said the earth shook and when he ran outside, people up the street were running and screaming, holding babies and pets. pic.twitter.com/b5F0clMOUX— Jackie Wang (@jcqlnwng) March 12, 2018

Just before noon, another explosion was reported at a home in the 6700 block of Galindo Street, about five miles south of the first blast.

A 75-year-old woman was critically injured in the blast. A second woman at the address was treated for an unrelated medical issue and was not hospitalized, officials said.

None of the victims' identities have been released.

Police do not have a suspect or vehicle description.

Authorities are offering a reward of up to \$15,000 for information that leads to an arrest. People with information can call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-252-8477, text "DPS" and a tip to 274637 or submit the tip online.

Man, 2 Texas deputies injured in daylong standoff; elderly woman found dead in house

Police said one of the residents at the Oldfort Hill Drive home found the package on the doorstep Monday morning and took it inside. Both residents were in the kitchen when the package exploded.

The victim in the Galindo Street blast also found a package outside her home, police said. The package exploded after she picked it up.

The U.S. Postal Service and other delivery companies do not believe either package was delivered by them, police said.

'A harrowing five minutes': Dallas-bound flight makes emergency landing in Albuquerque

On March 2, 39-year-old Anthony Stephan House died after a blast in the 1100 block of Haverford Drive. House's death was initially classified as suspicious; police said Monday that it had been reclassified as a homicide.

Austin police Chief Brian Manley said the evidence gathered by investigators indicates that the three explosions are related. He said it was too early in the investigation to assign a motive but stressed that authorities will leave no stone unturned until they find the person or people responsible.

"We are not ruling anything out at this point because when you rule something out you limit your focus of the investigation and you might miss something," he said.

"We are imploring the community, if you know anything about this it is imperative that you come forward and that you let us know," Manley said. "We are having innocent people getting hurt across this community and it is important that we come together as a community and solve this."

The FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives also are investigating.

Manley warned residents to be alert and not to open any suspicious packages or packages that they are not expecting. University of Texas police also warned students and faculty to be wary of suspicious packages.

Dallas police said that while no similar incidents have occurred here, people should be cautious and report any suspicious packages to 911. Do not pick up any such package, police said.

❖you receive a package that you are not expecting or looks suspicious, DO NOT open it, call 911 immediately. RT-Help us spread this message. ❖<https://t.co/j9bxbaaBce>—Chief Brian Manley (@chief_manley) March 12, 2018

"We are not going to tolerate this in Austin," Manley said.

Manley did not release specific details about the packages but said they were of "average size" and that the explosives they contained were powerful.

"That's why it is so imperative that no one attempts to touch move or handle one of these packages," Manley said. "If you receive a suspicious package then call us and let us come out."

Acknowledging the increased presence of visitors for the annual South by Southwest Festival, Manley said they should enjoy themselves and have a good time, but be vigilant.

In a statement, Gov. Greg Abbott and his wife, Cecilia, offered their thoughts and prayers to the victims of "these atrocious attacks."

"I want to assure all Texans, and especially those in Austin, that local, state and federal law enforcement officials are working diligently to find those responsible for these heinous crimes," Abbott said.

Texas Democrats won the early voting battle, but Republicans won the turnout race

Near Monday's second blast, neighbor Tina Guerrero, 35, was awakened by the sound of an explosion.

"It sounded like a big boom," she said. "We heard sirens and everything."

Guerrero, who was at home with three of her four children who are on spring break, said she is concerned about the package explosions.

"You don't know when another package is going to be delivered," she said. "Our natural instinct is to open it. Now we have to worry about what we receive."

Police Link Two More Bombings In Texas Capital To Earlier Attack

By Jon Herskovitz

[Reuters](#), March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Three Package Bombings At Austin Homes Are Linked, Police Say; Two Dead

By Matt Pearce

[Los Angeles Times](#), March 12, 2018

Police have linked three package bombings that have killed two residents in Austin, Texas, over the last 10 days, raising fears that a serial bomber is targeting the city as hundreds of thousands of festival-goers flock to town for South by Southwest.

Two of the bombings happened in residential areas in the eastern half of the city on Monday morning, not at the festival, and police have not identified a suspect or given a possible motive as federal officials joined the investigation.

"We are not ruling anything out at this point," Police Chief Brian Manley said at a televised news conference. "We're imploring the community, if you know anything about these attacks, it is imperative that you come forward and let us know. We have innocent people getting hurt across this community."

Before 7 a.m. Monday, residents at one home in east Austin found a mysterious package on their doorstep and brought it inside, Manley said.

When they began opening the package in their kitchen, the package exploded, killing a 17-year-old boy and injuring a woman who was taken the hospital with non-life-threatening injuries, Manley said.

Several hours later, shortly before noon and about five miles to the south, a 75-year-old woman found a similar mysterious package on her porch. "She picked up the package, and at that point, the explosion, the box detonated," Manley said.

The day's second bombing happened so soon after the morning's first explosion that some officials went directly from one bombing site to another, Manley said. The woman remained in critical condition Monday afternoon with life-threatening injuries.

The two bombings came a little over a week after a northeast Austin resident, Anthony Stephan House, 39, was killed in a "very similar" package bombing early in the morning, Manley said.

Police had initially deemed House's death "suspicious" — saying it couldn't be ruled out that he had assembled the package himself — but on Monday reclassified his death as a homicide.

The "average-sized" packages don't appear to have been sent through traditional delivery services such as the U.S. Postal Service or UPS, and were left without ringing the

bell, said Manley, who declined to give details about the devices but suggested they came in cardboard boxes.

"These devices can explode in many ways, either by being moved or being opened," Manley said, also cautioning that the bombs "can be hidden in many different ways. ... There is a certain level of skill required to put a device like this together successfully."

Manley suggested that residents call 911 if they find a suspicious package and to leave their homes or wait in the rear until officials arrive.

"We will respond," Manley said. "It make take a little while to get there because we are getting several calls."

The victims of the first two bombings were black, raising fears early Monday that the Austinites were targeted because of their race, but the victim of the third bombing was Latino after which police declined to speculate on a possible pattern.

"We have no specific ideology or victimology behind this, and it will remain an ongoing investigation while we pursue any and every lead," Manley said.

"We do not know yet whether the victims are the intended targets," Manley said, adding that some homes had multiple residents and the bomber may have also targeted the wrong addresses.

Three 'Powerful' Package Explosions In Austin That Killed 2 Are Connected, Police Say

By Eva Ruth Moravec, Mark Berman And Amy B Wang
Washington Post, March 12, 2018

AUSTIN — Police said Monday that the three exploding packages that detonated at homes in this city across a 10-day period — including two blasts on Monday — are all connected, although precisely what motivated the attacks remained an unnerving mystery.

The explosions across residential parts of the Texas capital killed two people, seriously injured two others and set residents on edge, even as the city continued hosting South by Southwest, a music, film and technology conference that draws tens of thousands of visitors each year.

Police urged residents to call 911 rather than open unexpected packages, while local and federal authorities scrambled to respond to the blasts, at one point Monday hurrying from one explosion to another across town.

Authorities say they are exploring whether the explosions could be related to racial hatred, noting that both of the people killed — an adult man and a teenager — were black, while an elderly Hispanic woman was seriously injured.

"These incidents are related," Austin Police Chief Brian Manley said at a briefing. But as for what might have prompted the string of explosions, he said: "We are not ruling anything out at this point."

The first explosion occurred March 2, when a package on the front porch of a northeast Austin home exploded, killing 39-year-old Anthony Stephan House.

"It sounded like a cannon," Kenneth Thompson Sr., who lives across the street from House, said of the explosion.

At the time, police said House's death was "suspicious" but believed it was an isolated incident with no continuing threat to the community.

Ten days later, that changed when a pair of packages detonated at homes several miles apart Monday over a matter of hours.

Investigators were still responding to the first explosion Monday morning — which killed a 17-year-old male and seriously injured an adult woman — when a second blast detonated at a house farther south, sending a 75-year-old Hispanic woman to the hospital with life-threatening injuries.

Reached by phone Monday, LaVonne Mason, co-founder of the Austin Area Urban League, said her grandson was the 17-year-old victim killed Monday morning, but she declined to say anything further. Her husband, Norman Mason, is a well-known dentist in the East Austin area and a longtime mentor to black student athletes at the University of Texas.

Relatives on the scene identified the woman injured in the third blast as Esperanza Herrera. They also said her mother, Maria Moreno, suffered minor injuries. Manley said that just as in the other bombings, the injured woman came outside her home, found a package and picked it up.

"The box detonated at that point," he said.

Manley said police did not know if the victims who were killed or injured were the specific targets of the packages. The police chief warned residents to avoid opening unexpected packages or other deliveries they were not expecting; he described the explosives as arriving in "box-type deliveries" but did not elaborate, citing the ongoing investigation.

"It's not time to panic, but it's time to be vigilant," he said.

Authorities stressed that they did not believe the explosions were tied to the South by Southwest festival.

At this time @Austin_Police investigators don't believe that the recent explosions are connected to #SXSW. Visitors and residents, enjoy your week but stay vigilant. If you see something, say something by calling 9-1-1— Austin Texas (@austintexasgov) March 12, 2018

Manley said that police could not rule out a hate crime as the cause of the bombing, though he warned that police had not yet identified any ideology or connection between the victims. The FBI was assisting with the investigation, and Michelle Lee, a spokeswoman for the bureau, said agents were "definitely not ruling out" a hate crime, due to the race of the first two victims.

"There's always concern about that," Nelson Linder, president of the NAACP of Austin, said of a potential hate crime, "but other than the two first victims' race, there's no evidence to say they were one at this time."

Still, he said, people are "very concerned and feel very vulnerable."

The Rev. Sylvester Chase, the pastor at Wesley United Methodist Church, said Anthony House, the first victim, was the stepson of Freddie Dixon, a former pastor there. While House was not a parishioner, Chase said he was rattled by the bombing.

"It's got us on alarm, everybody on alarm," he said. "We don't know what to think, because they haven't put out any type of information. It's just circumstantial, what it could be, what it might be."

Rianne Philips, who lives next door to House, said her husband was the first to find House after the fatal March 2 blast. Philips said that she was alarmed to hear about the latest bombing, but also relieved that the police were now focused on House's death as a homicide.

"They're not going to let this slide," Philips said. "It's really sad, but this means there's a lot of attention on this now."

Isaiah Guerrero, 15, said he was spending the first morning of his spring break making music on his computer when he heard the third explosion go off just before noon Monday.

"It sounded like two cars hit each other, you know? Like, rammed each other," Guerrero said.

The house shook, and so did his body, the teenager said. Guerrero then climbed up a tree and on top of his house. Within minutes, police and fire officials swarmed the scene, closing off streets. Guerrero, who lives behind the house where the bomb went off, said he couldn't see the damage to the front of the house.

He echoed law enforcement officials in warning the public to pay attention to things like packages, "especially if you didn't order something," he said. Guerrero added: "I expected my spring break to be peaceful, not harmful."

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives said Monday it was dispatching members of its National Response Team (NRT) to help respond to the explosions. According to the agency, this group activates for "significant fire and explosion incidents," considered those that are either large in scale or particularly complicated due to the size or scope.

In the past, that has included responding to the West, Tex., plant fire in 2013; a string of church fires in Texas; and the bombings in Oklahoma City and at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. The NRT works with other investigators to reconstruct scenes and determine what caused the fires or explosions; in cases involving bombings, the team also

searches for evidence to be used in any prosecution that may follow.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) said his office was offering a \$15,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the person or people responsible for the "atrocious attacks."

"I want to assure all Texans, and especially those in Austin, that local, state and federal law enforcement officials are working diligently to find those responsible for these heinous crimes," Abbott said in a statement.

Manley said local and federal law enforcement agencies would ensure "every stop would be pulled out" to solve the cases.

"We are not going to tolerate this in Austin," he said.

Berman and Wang reported from Washington. Matt Zapotosky in Washington and Shane Harris in Austin contributed to this report, which has been updated.

Austin Package Explosions: Police See Similarities In Deadly Incidents

By Alan Gomez

USA Today, March 12, 2018

An Austin teenager was killed and several others injured Monday when two packages left on doorsteps exploded, marking the second and third deadly package explosions in the Texas capital in two weeks.

Austin Police Chief Brian Manley said the three incidents displayed enough similarities to lead police to investigate them together. Because two of the victims were African Americans and one was Hispanic, Manley said, investigators also were viewing the attacks as possible hate crimes.

His department is working with the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to determine whether the three bombs were similar and to identify the person, or people, who built them.

"We are not going to tolerate this in Austin," Manley said while briefing reporters on the explosion. "Every stop will be pulled out."

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott offered a \$15,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the person who planted the bombs.

"I want to assure all Texans, and especially those in Austin, that local, state and federal law enforcement officials are working diligently to find those responsible for these heinous crimes," he said.

In all three cases, packages were left on a doorstep during the night and residents found them in the morning.

The first incident occurred March 2 in a home in northern Austin. Anthony Stephan House, 39, was killed by the blast, but his death was not initially ruled a homicide because it was an "isolated incident."

After two more explosions on Monday, House's death was reclassified as a homicide and added to the broader investigation.

The first call Monday came at 6:44 a.m. A 17-year-old male and an "adult female" found a package on their doorstep and opened it inside their kitchen. Neighbors called police after hearing an explosion inside the house.

The teen died in the hospital. The woman received minor injuries.

"The damage is significant, and there's a lot of evidence that needs to be collected," Manley said.

As investigators combed through the scene, residents from south Austin called police about another explosion inside a house. Police responded and found a 75-year-old Hispanic woman who also had found a package outside that exploded when she opened it.

Manley said she was facing "life-threatening injuries."

Manley said his office still didn't know the motive behind the attacks. He said his office has not ruled out terrorism.

"We're looking at any possible avenues in these two cases," Manley said.

Manley urged Austin residents to call police if they find any package on their doorstep that gives them "cause for concern."

"If you find any suspicious packages on your front porch at your residence, do not handle them but instead call 911 and let us come out and take a look at those packages and ensure that they are safe," he said.

Manley said the U.S. Postal Service confirmed that its carriers had not delivered the package in Monday's explosion. And while police are checking with other delivery services, including Amazon, UPS and FedEx, Manley said it appeared the packages were not delivered through traditional services.

Manley said federal and local investigators would spend the day Monday analyzing the latest explosions and trying to piece together how the bombs were built.

He said the timing of the attacks is complicated by the fact that the city is hosting the SXSW conference, with business, music, film and technology leaders spread out at events throughout the city.

"Enjoy yourself, have a good time," Manley said. But "be aware, look for things that are suspicious."

Explosions In Austin, Texas, Kill Teen, Injure Two

Package bomb that killed 17-year-old boy similar to bombing earlier in March, investigators say

By Dan Frosch

Wall Street Journal, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Greg Abbott Announces Reward In Deadly Austin Explosions

By Stephen English And Prescotte Stokes III

Fort Worth (TX) Star-Telegram, March 12, 2018

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's criminal justice division has offered up to \$15,000 as a reward for information that leads to an arrest in three package explosions in Austin, including two that were deadly.

Abbott released the statement on Monday afternoon and also offered to provide whatever resources authorities say they need to investigate the blasts, which have occurred over the past 10 days.

Austin police on Monday responded to two explosions, the first of which killed a teenager and maimed a woman in her 40s, on the heels of a deadly explosion on March 2.

Police said Monday morning that they believed the three blasts to be linked because each package was hand-delivered rather than mailed, The Associated Press reported.

Authorities warn residents to contact police if they receive an unexpected package.

Shortly before noon Monday, a third explosion was reported, this one in the 6700 block of Galindo Street, according to the FBI's San Antonio office, which is assisting in the investigation. Like the first two, it could become a fatality.

Exploding packages Where the explosions occurred in Austin. Click on markers for more details.

Austin-Travis County emergency services reported that a woman in her 70s was transported to Dell Seton Medical Center with potentially life-threatening injuries.

On March 2, a package explosion just before 7 a.m. killed Anthony Stephan House, police said. Both he and the victims of the Monday explosions were African-American, the AP reports, adding that police are seeking surveillance video from nearby homes to identify a suspect.

An Austin TV station reported that Monday's first explosion happened shortly before 7 a.m. about 11 miles from the location of the March 2 explosion. An ABC affiliate in Austin reported that the original call was made at 6:44 a.m. The blast occurred about 5 miles from the Austin Convention Center, where South by Southwest events were set to take place Monday.

House's death was initially not called a homicide, but police said they considered it a suspicious death because they didn't know whether House had constructed the bomb himself and accidentally detonated it, according to Fox News. The AP reports that his death is now considered a homicide.

Although no exploding packages have been reported in Fort Worth, police have tips for residents should they receive a suspicious package at their home or workplace, according to department spokesman Tracy Carter.

"You know what kind of mail and packages you usually receive. Look for things that are out of the ordinary, such as unexpected mail from a foreign country," said Carter.

Dallas police also said that no similar incidents have been reported. But both departments offered the following tips to residents that might help in identifying a suspicious package:

- Unfamiliar return address or none at all
- Strange odor or noise
- Protruding wires
- Excessive postage
- Misspelled words
- Addressed to a business title only (e.g. President)
- Restrictive markings (e.g. Do not X-ray)
- Badly typed or written
- Rigid or bulky letters
- Lopsided or uneven
- Excessive wrapping, tape or string
- Oily stains, discoloration or crystallization on wrapping
- Leaking

As for Abbott's \$15,000 reward for information, anonymous tips can be submitted to Texas Crime Stoppers by calling 800-252-8477 or texting "DPS" followed by your tip to 274637.

Austin, Texas, On Edge After Spate Of Package Bombs Kills Two

By Jason Abbruzzese

NBC News, March 12, 2018

AUSTIN, Texas — The Texas capital was on edge Monday after a spate of package bombings left two Austin residents dead and two others badly wounded.

The latest victim was a 75-year-old woman who was listed as critical but stable with "life threatening injuries" after a package she found outside her home exploded in her arms, Police Chief Brian Manley said Monday afternoon.

The woman was hurt just hours after a 17-year-old boy was killed and another woman was injured by another deadly delivery, Manley said.

Both cases bear "similarities" to the death of Stephan House, 39, who was killed March 2 by a package bomb that was delivered to his Austin home, Manley said.

"This again [is] the third in what we believe to be related incidents that have occurred over the past 10 days," Manley said. "They are not ringing doorbells. Residents are coming out of their homes and finding them on their doorsteps."

Manley said it was too soon to say whether the incidents were the work of a serial bomber.

"But there have been a pattern of incidents," he said. "These are powerful bombs."

So far, police haven't determined a motive, Manley said, but they aren't ruling out the possibility that they could

be hate crimes. The most recent victim was Hispanic, and the other three victims were black.

"We are not ruling anything out," Manley said.

Emergency vehicles block the road after a package exploded on Galindo Street in Austin, Texas, on Monday. Sergio Flores / Reuters

None of the dangerous packages was delivered by the U.S. Postal Service, officials said.

"If you have a package show at your home and you're not expecting one, call 911," Manley said. "The three incidences have all occurred at residences. It is important that people be aware."

That goes for the thousands of people attending South by Southwest, or SXSW, in Austin, although police said Monday afternoon that the explosions weren't believed to be related to the music, film and technology festival.

Many of the SXSW attendees interviewed by NBC News were unaware of what was happening.

Festival volunteer Kendra Shaw said she hadn't heard of the bombings or gotten any notifications from organizers.

Isaac Machado hides behind his hat against his mother, Delores, outside the scene of an explosion on Galindo Street in Austin, Texas, on Monday. Sergio Flores / Reuters

"We don't want everyone to start freaking out," she said. "I feel like South by Southwest has done a better job over the years of handling those things."

Jessica Stratton, who was attending the festival, said she saw TV reports about the bombings. "It seemed to be a non-festival-related incident, so I instantly relaxed," she said.

SXSW ratcheted up security four years ago after a driver plowed through a barricade and mowed down festival-goers, killing four of them.

The three blasts happened in different parts of east Austin, and House's death was initially investigated as suspicious, Manley said. It's now officially a homicide, he said.

The FBI and investigators from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were assisting Austin police, said Special Agent Michelle Lee of the FBI's San Antonio office.

Abbruzzese reported from Austin. Siemaszko reported from New York City.

3 Deadly Package Explosions In Austin Appear Connected, Police Say

By Tina Burnside, Ralph Ellis And Joe Sterling

CNN, March 12, 2018

(CNN)Two package bombs that exploded Monday at residences in Austin, Texas, killing a teenage boy and critically injuring an elderly woman, appear to be linked to a March 2 bomb that killed a man, police said at a news conference.

Here's what we know so far:

- The bombs killed a 39-year-old African-American man on March 2, killed a 17-year-old African-American male early Monday morning, and severely injured a 75-year-old Hispanic woman midday Monday. A woman also was injured in the Monday morning blast.

- The residents found the packages outside their houses, but none was delivered by the Postal Service or delivery services like UPS or FedEx, police said.

- Police also have not decided if these are hate crimes, but said that's a possibility because of the victims' races.

- "The evidence makes us believe these incidents are related," Austin Police Chief Brian Manley said.

Authorities in Austin investigate a package explosion Monday that left one person dead and another injured.

All residents of Austin should be careful about packages, Manley said. Investigators have not come up with a motive, and he did not say if anybody has claimed responsibility. It's not known if the victims knew each other or if they were targeted, he said.

"If you've received a package that has been left on your doorstep or left in your yard or left on your driveway that you were not expecting or that was not from someone you know, then give us a call," Manley said.

Likewise, he urged the thousands of visitors in town – many at the South by Southwest Conference and Festivals – to be cautious. "Enjoy yourself, have a good time," he said. "But be aware, be suspicious."

SXSW began Friday in downtown Austin. The explosions were not in the immediate vicinity of the festival.

Anthony Stephan House

Authorities have identified one victim. Anthony Stephan House, 39, died from injuries in the March 2 explosion, police said. The elderly woman injured Monday afternoon suffered life-threatening injuries, Manly said.

In describing the Monday morning blast that killed the teenager, the chief said: "What we understand at this point is that early this morning is that one of the residents went out front and there was a package on the front doorstep. They brought that package inside the residence and as they opened that package, both victims were in the kitchen, and the package exploded, causing the injuries that resulted in the young man's death and the injuries to the adult female."

That woman's injuries were not life-threatening, he said.

The March 2 blast was reported about 6:55 a.m. in the 1000 block of Haverford Drive. The first Monday blast was reported at 6:44 a.m. in the 4000 block of Oldfort Drive and the second Monday blast was around noon in the 6700 block of Galindo Street.

Police were processing the scene at the first Monday explosion when the second occurred.

Manley said the packages are "average sized delivery boxes, not exceptionally large" that the residents found outside their houses.

"These are very powerful devices," he said, declining to be specific. "There's a certain level of skill required to move a device like this."

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton urged all Texans to be cautious. "With three reported explosions in the Austin area, I want to urge all Texans to report any suspicious or unexpected packages arriving by mail to local law enforcement authorities. Call 911 immediately if you receive something suspicious," he said on Twitter.

With three reported explosions in the Austin area, I want to urge all Texans to report any suspicious or unexpected packages arriving by mail to local law enforcement authorities. Call 9-1-1 immediately if you receive something suspicious.— Ken Paxton (@KenPaxtonTX) March 12, 2018

Local police, as well as agencies including the FBI, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, are working on the case.

The ATF is processing evidence from the first device at its lab and evidence from the second device will also be sent to an ATF lab for consistency.

Gov. Greg Abbott announced a \$15,000 reward for information leading to the identification and arrest of the person or persons involved in the package blasts.

Correction: A previous headline for this story on the CNN app incorrectly stated that the explosive packages were connected to the South By Southwest Interactive Festival, currently taking place in Austin. The police have not said there is a connection. The CNN app headline has been corrected.

CNN law enforcement analyst Josh Campbell and CNN's David Shortell contributed to this report.

Package Bombs In Texas Capital Likely Tied To Earlier Blast

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) – Two package bomb blasts a few miles apart killed a teenager and wounded two women in Austin on Monday, less than two weeks after a similar attack left a man dead in another part of the Texas capital.

Investigators said the bombings are probably connected, and they are looking into whether race was a factor because all of the victims were minorities. The blasts unfolded just as the city was swelling with visitors to the South By Southwest music festival.

The first of Monday's attacks killed a 17-year-old boy and wounded a 40-year-old woman, both of them black. As Police Chief Brian Manley held a news conference to discuss that attack, authorities were called to the scene of another

explosion that injured a 75-year-old Hispanic woman. She was taken to a hospital with potentially life-threatening wounds.

Authorities suspect that both of Monday's explosions were linked to a March 2 attack that killed a 39-year-old black man. All three blasts happened as the packages were opened, and officials urged the public to call police if they receive any unexpected packages.

"This is the third in what we believe to be related incidents over the past 10 days," Manley said while briefing reporters near the site of Monday's second explosion. He at first suggested that the blasts could constitute a hate crime, but later amended that to say authorities had not settled on a motive.

"We are not ruling anything out at this point," said Manley, who said the intended targets were not clear since multiple people live in the homes where explosives were placed. "We are willing to investigate any avenue that may be involved."

The police chief refused to provide many details about how the explosives were packaged, citing the ongoing investigation. But he said they were an "average-size letter box" and "not particularly large."

In all three cases, he said, the packages did not appear to have gone through the U.S. Postal Service or private carriers like UPS. They were left on doorsteps without a knock or ringing of doorbells.

The explosions happened far from the main events of the wildly popular festival known as SXSW, which brings about 400,000 visitors to Austin each year. Manley urged visitors to "be aware of what's going on."

"Enjoy yourself. Have a good time," he said. "There's no reason to believe that you are at any greater risk other than be aware, look for things that are suspicious."

In a tweet, organizers of the festival said "SXSW is heartbroken by the explosions in Austin," and they urged visitors to stay safe. Gov. Greg Abbott offered a \$15,000 reward for information leading to an arrest.

Four years ago, a driver plowed through a barricade and into festival-goers, killing four people and injuring many others. Extra security measures were taken, including additional policing, tougher security checks and brighter street lighting.

The three explosions occurred in different parts of east Austin, which is east of Interstate 35, the highway that divides the city. The east side has historically been more heavily minority and less wealthy than the west side, although that has changed as gentrification has raised home prices and rents throughout the capital.

Monday's first blast happened at a home in Springdale Hills, a leafy neighborhood of houses mostly from the 1960s and 1970s. After the attack, officials in hazardous materials suits came and went regularly.

That was about 12 miles (20 kilometers) from the home where the March 2 package bomb killed 39-year-old Anthony Stephan House. House's death was initially investigated as suspicious but is now viewed as a homicide.

Monday's second explosion occurred around the Montopolis neighborhood, about 5 miles south of the day's first blast.

Joanna Samarripa, who lives around the corner, said she saw a woman slumped in the doorway of the home after rushing over moments after the explosion.

"The cops were running and telling everyone 'Get out of the house! Get out of the house!'" Samarripa said. "I'm still scared. I'm still shaking. I don't even want to leave my daughter no more."

Neighbor Keith Reynolds heard what sounded to him like a propane explosion. He rushed outside and saw a cloud of hazy smoke and others on his street running to help.

"There was a horrible screaming. You knew that something terrible was happening," Reynolds said, adding that the victim's body was riddled with holes as emergency responders took her out of the house and into an ambulance.

"It's just a regular family neighborhood," he said. "It's just a grandmother, you know what I mean? Like, why?"

FBI teams from Austin, San Antonio and Dallas were investigating as was the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Manley said anyone receiving a package they were not expecting should call 911.

"Under no circumstances should you touch them, move them or handle them in any way," he said.

The victims in Monday's blasts were not immediately identified.

Associated Press writers Jim Vertuno in Austin and David Warren in Dallas contributed to this report.

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Police Chief Confirms 3 Package Bombs Are Related

[Austin \(TX\) American Statesman](#), March 12, 2018

5:50 p.m. update: The Washington Post has identified one of the people injured in Southeast Austin during Monday's second package explosion.

Esperanza Herrera is the 75-year-old woman injured in the explosion at the 6700 block of Galindo Street, according to relatives at the scene, the Post reported. They also said her mother, Maria Moreno, suffered minor injuries, the newspaper said.

The incident happened hours after police responded to a previous package explosion at the 4800 block of Oldfort Hill Drive, killing a teenager and injuring a woman, police have said. LaVonne Mason, co-founder of the Austin Area Urban League, told the Post her grandson was the 17-year-old victim killed Monday morning. The newspaper did not name the grandson.

3:20 p.m. update: A 75-year-old woman was injured after picking up an exploding package outside her Southeast Austin home on Monday in the second blast reported in the city and the third similar incident in two weeks, Austin police said.

Interim Police Chief Brian Manley confirmed that evidence suggested that this bombing was related to two previous blasts from "box-type deliveries" that killed a teenager earlier in the day and a 39-year-old man 10 days ago.

Manley warned the public about receiving unexpected or suspicious-looking deliveries in an "average-size delivery box," but declined to offer more specifics about the packages to protect the integrity of the investigation.

He said the devices can be detonated by moving or by opening the boxes.

"Assigning a motive is not possible at this stage in the investigation," Manley said, adding that police were willing to investigate any avenue.

"We will leave no stone unturned because we will not allow this to go on in this city," he said.

The chief said authorities did not have a description of suspects or suspected vehicles.

So it was "imperative that you come forward if you know something," he said. "We have innocent people being hurt."

Emergency personnel responded to the 6700 block of Galindo Street on Monday, just five hours after authorities began investigating a package bombing that killed a 17-year-old and seriously injured a woman in her 40s in East Austin, Manley said.

The woman was hospitalized with critical injuries, he said.

Federal investigators with the FBI, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and the U.S. Postal Service were working with police, Manley said.

"It's not time to panic, but it is time to be vigilant," Manley said. "If you see a suspicious package on yours or somebody else's doorstep, let us know."

Austin police said "suspicious package" calls spiked drastically Monday.

At 3 p.m., Austin police said they had received 34 "suspicious package" calls since 8:12 a.m. In comparison, last Monday, Austin police received two of those calls.

"I can't fault people for being careful. ... I'm sure that number is likely to grow," said Tara Long, Austin police spokeswoman.

For example, police responded to a suspicious package call in the 5000 block of Regency Drive, off FM 969. Then, 15 minutes later, police responded to another suspicious package call at Deep Eddy Pool.

These incidents do not appear to be connected to South by Southwest, police said.

Meanwhile, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said his office's Criminal Justice Division would offer a reward of up to \$15,000 for information leading to the arrest of the person or people involved in the package bombs.

"As the investigation continues, the state of Texas will provide any resources necessary to ensure the safety of our citizens, and quickly bring those guilty to justice," he said in a statement.

The governor's office said to receive the reward, tips must be submitted to Texas Crime Stoppers by:

Earlier: A woman in her 70s was injured in the second reported explosion at a home in Austin on Monday, Austin-Travis County EMS said.

Medics were sent out to the 6700 block of Galindo Street, near Montopolis and East Riverside drives in Southeast Austin at 11:49 a.m., EMS said.

The woman was taken to Dell Seton Medical Center with serious and potentially life-threatening injuries.

Another woman in her 80s was being treated for an unrelated medical issue but was not being hospitalized, EMS said.

The incident marks the second reported explosion in the city on Monday and the third in two weeks.

An explosion earlier in the day in the 4800 block of Oldfort Hill Drive in East Austin killed a 17-year-old and injured a woman described as in her 40s.

Hours after that incident, interim Austin Police Chief Brian Manley said that explosion appeared similar and likely related to another explosion in Northeast Austin on March 2.

Authorities on Monday also warned residents against taking suspicious packages inside their homes.

The incidents are being investigated by police and federal authorities, as a homicide, the chief said.

He also said that investigators were not ruling out the possibility of the explosions being a hate crime because the victims in those cases are African-American.

The U.S. Postal Service told investigators that the packages did not come through their facilities, so the packages were likely left by someone at the doorstep, Manley said.

Manley said authorities know what kind of explosive devices were used, but they are not revealing details in order to preserve the integrity of the investigation.

Manley said people can call 911 if they believe they have received a suspicious or unexpected package left at their homes.

"We will not tolerate this in Austin," Manley said.

Police did not identify the teenager or the woman and have not released any details about the East Austin package.

In the package explosion on March 2, Austin police responded to a home in the 1100 block of Haverford Drive around 6:55 a.m.

First responders took 39-year-old Anthony Stephan House to a hospital, but he died from his injuries shortly after the blast.

Since then, authorities have not named anyone who may have been involved.

Yasmin Navarro said she lives on Galindo Street in the house across from the one where the explosion happened Monday.

She said she was at work when she got news of the blast. She said she spoke with a friend from California who told her to check on her mother and sister because there had been an explosion at their house.

When she got back to Galindo Street, the road was shut down, and she couldn't get back to her house.

She said she's scared because she's heard of other bombs throughout the city.

"I'm scared for everyone's safety," she said in Spanish. "It hurts me a lot that she's hurt, or that something else is going to happen.

Series Of Bombs Left In Packages Puts Austin Residents On Edge

By David Begnaud

CBS News, March 12, 2018

Last Updated Mar 12, 2018 6:53 PM EDT

AUSTIN, Texas – For the second and third time this month, someone left packages containing bombs at homes in Austin, Texas, killing two people and wounding two others. The explosions Monday happened at homes just a few miles apart.

The first bomb today exploded around 6:40 a.m. Monday. Five hours later, another explosion occurred five miles away.

"There was a package that exploded inside of the home. They have, to our knowledge, evacuated," a dispatcher was heard saying earlier Monday. "We have trauma activation, 65-year-old female, they are treating trauma, head and torso," an EMS worker was heard saying. "Can you confirm this was a device as of this morning?" dispatch asked. EMS responded: "That is affirmative."

It was the third package bombing in 10 days. The first happened March 2, killing 39-year-old Anthony Stephan House. The early morning bombing killed a 17-year-old boy and sent an adult woman to the hospital with non-life threatening injuries.

A 75-year-old woman was severely injured in the afternoon attack.

"We are looking at these incidents as being related based on similarities we have seen," Austin police chief Brian Manley said Monday. "These packages are being delivered in the night time hours and in the morning when the resident comes out they find them on their doorstep."

A police officer guards the scene of an explosion on Galindo Street in Austin, Texas, on Mon., March 12, 2018.

The police say the devices are powerful enough to cause extensive damage inside the homes and showed a certain amount of sophistication. Both the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) are on the scene and have joined the local police to investigate.

"We will leave no stone unturned because we are not going to continue to let this go on in our city," Manley added.

All three bombings happened on Austin's east side – it's the predominantly minority and historically African-American part of town. Three of the victims are black, the elderly woman is Hispanic.

"We cannot rule out that hate crime is at the core of this but we are not saying that's the cause as well. We are just acknowledging and looking at any possible motivation," Manley said.

"I don't understand it, I just don't understand it," one resident said.

No matter the motivation, the bombings have shaken the foundation of this community.

Manley told CBS News that the explosions aren't just happening when people pick them up. Apparently one explosive detonated after the person took it inside a home and opened it.

"A couple of people knew the family, my heart goes out, you see, I am in tears now," the resident added.

The Texas governor's office is offering a reward of up to \$15,000 for information leading to the arrest of those involved in the deadly package blasts. In a statement, Gov. Greg Abbott said he's been briefed by the Texas Department of Public Safety on the situation. He also says he's offered the Austin Police Department whatever assistance it needs in its investigation.

Abbott says he wants to assure Texans, especially those in the Austin area, "that local, state and federal law enforcement officials are working diligently to find those responsible for these heinous crimes."

Officials have urged residents to call police if they receive a suspicious package. There have been dozens of calls so far Monday night.

Emergency vehicles block the road after a package exploded at the home where a 17-year-old boy was killed and a woman injured in a explosion in Austin, Texas, on Mon., March 12, 2018.

Austin Police Reveal Timeline Of Package Explosions, Warn Residents To Be 'Aware' Of Suspicious Boxes

By Jennifer Earl

Fox News, March 12, 2018

Police are on high alert in Austin, Texas, after a string of package deliveries have left at least two people dead and several others injured after explosions rocked their homes.

The first explosion occurred on March 2, killing 39-year-old Anthony Stephan House after a "device" exploded on the front porch of his Austin home. The blast was initially investigated as a suspicious death, but is now being viewed as a homicide.

Ten days later, a similar incident was reported just 12 miles from House's home. A teenager was killed and a woman was injured after a package exploded inside their home.

Investigators believe the package bombs are linked, though they said it's too early to "assign a motive."

"It is very similar to the incident that occurred in Austin on March 2," Austin Police Chief Brian Manley told reporters during a Monday morning press conference. "There are similarities that we cannot rule out that these two items are, in fact, related."

Hours after the second explosion occurred, police reported a third blast, confirming that at least one elderly woman was injured. Authorities said Monday afternoon they believe the incident is also related to the prior two package bombings.

Here's a timeline of the deadly package explosions shaking Austin – and what police are advising residents as they continue to investigate the three incidents. March 12

6:45 a.m.

Austin Police received a call about an explosion in a neighborhood on the northwest side of the city after a 17-year-old resident found a package on the front step, brought it inside and opened it in the kitchen, where it exploded.

9:30 a.m.

Authorities confirm a teenager is dead and a woman in her 40s is seriously injured after a package explodes at a home in Austin, marking the second such explosion in the city within two weeks.

Police say the teen died at the scene, while the woman was taken to a hospital with life-threatening injuries.

The FBI offers to assist Austin police with the investigation.

10:45 a.m.

The Austin Police Department holds a press briefing in the neighborhood where the second package bombing occurred.

10:50 a.m.

Authorities say they believe the package bomb that killed the teenager and wounded the woman is linked to the deadly package sent to House's home earlier this month because they were both left on the front doorstep and not delivered by a mail service.

Manley said the U.S. Postal Service does not have a record of delivering a package to the Austin home where the explosion occurred Monday.

Police reclassify House's death as a "homicide investigation," instead of a "suspicious death," as the two incidents may be related.

Manley says investigators hope to collect surveillance video and evidence from nearby homes to identify a suspect.

"We're doing a canvas of the neighborhood right now," Manley says.

11:50 a.m.

Another explosion is reported in the Montopolis neighborhood, located southeast of downtown Austin.

The Austin Police Department confirms police are responding to an "urgent" call.

12:08 p.m.

Austin-Travis County EMS officials declare a "trauma alert," announcing they are transporting at least one patient to the hospital following a reported explosion.

12:16 p.m.

Austin-Travis County EMS confirm in a tweet that a woman in her 70s has "serious, potentially life-threatening" injuries. A second woman from that address had an unrelated medical issue and was not taken to the hospital.

2:45 p.m.

Police hold another press briefing to update reporters on a third blast in Austin.

2:50 p.m.

Police identify the victim of the third bombing as a 75-year-old Hispanic woman, who is currently in "critical, but stable condition."

Based on evidence gathered at the scene, police say they believe the third incident is related to the two previous incidents involving package bombs.

"We do not have a specific victimology ... at this point, we are willing to investigate any avenue that may be involved behind these attacks," Manley says.

Manley says it's not yet clear whether these victims were "intended targets," but asks the community to be vigilant.

"We are having innocent people getting hurt across the community," he adds. March 2

6:55 a.m.

Austin police receive reports of an explosion and find a critically-injured House. The 39-year-old victim is then transported to nearby Round Rock Hospital.

Anthony Stephan House died Friday after a device exploded on the front porch of his Austin, Texas home.

(Austin Police Department)

7:48 a.m.

House is declared dead at the hospital nearly an hour later. Authorities announce House's death is being investigated as "suspicious."

10:45 a.m.

The Austin Police Department holds a press conference in House's neighborhood.

10:50 a.m.

"When we arrived, we saw that there had been an explosion of some type," Assistant Chief Joseph Chacon with the Austin Police Department tells reporters at a news conference. "What we have determined in the following days is that this appeared to be a package."

Austin police say they've determined the device was inside a package, and are working with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to reconstruct the item and learn who may have created it.

"Right now, we're trying to determine how did the package get there and who was the intended target? We do feel that this was targeted at somebody. We're still trying to figure out whether that was the individual who died or not," Chacon adds.

Police say it is "an isolated incident and that there is no continuing threat to the community," adding that there is no reason to believe it is terror-related.

"Anytime we have a bomb go off like that and somebody dies, the first thing people think is terrorism. While we cannot completely rule it out at this point, we do not believe that terrorism is a motive in this death," said Chacon.

House had also faced previous charges in Travis County, according to FOX 7. Police warn residents to beware of suspicious packages

Manley said he wants the public to be "aware" of the incidents, especially since the incidents may be related.

"If you find any suspicious packages on your front porch at your residence do not handle them, but instead call 911," Manley instructed. "Let us look at those packages and ensure they are safe."

It's "appropriate for residents to be concerned," Manley continued, as police have not yet identified a suspect in the cases.

Fox News' Travis Fedischun and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Austin Police Say 3 Explosions That Killed 2 And Injured More Are Related

By Kelsey Bradshaw

San Antonio Express-News, March 12, 2018

Austin police have asked for the community's help finding the person or group behind a string of incidents where

packages left on doorsteps exploded, causing two deaths and injuring several people.

Officials also warned Austin residents to call police if they encounter a suspicious package and to avoid opening packages they weren't expecting.

On Monday, a teenager was killed and two women were sent to the hospital with injuries after two packages delivered by unknown sources exploded on opposite ends of the city. The two incidents come 10 days after a man was killed after a package he had received March 2 exploded on his front porch.

"We are imploring the community, if you know anything about these attacks, it is imperative that you come forward and let us know," Austin Police Chief Brian Manley said.

Manley said investigators believe the three incidents are related. He said investigators are searching for a motive and trying to determine the ideology or victimology behind the attacks.

No official mail service, like the U.S. Postal Service, dropped the packages off, he said. All three were cardboard boxes that exploded when they were moved or opened.

Gov. Greg Abbott is offering \$15,000 for information leading to the arrest of the person or persons behind the packages. Tips must be submitted to Texas Crime Stoppers, through the DPS Mobile App, through the DPS website or buy texting "DPS" to 274637.

Each incident occurred in a different area of Austin. The first explosion, on March 2, was in the 1100 block of Haverford Drive on the city's far North Side. Ten days later and roughly 11 miles southeast, the second explosion occurred in the 4800 block of Oldfort Hill Drive.

Roughly six hours later, the third explosion, in which a 75-year-old woman was seriously injured, occurred in the 6700 block of Galindo Street, about 5.5 miles south of the morning incident.

San Antonio Police Chief William McManus said local residents should call the police if they receive anything suspicious.

"I wouldn't say that we (San Antonio) should be worried, I would say that we should be cautious," he said.

Manley said the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were assisting in the investigation. The victims have not yet been identified.

The police chief also addressed visitors in town for the South by Southwest festival, saying they should be aware of explosions. He said if residents receive a suspicious package, they should call the police.

"We will leave no stone unturned because we are not going to allow this to go on in our city," he said.

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Guantánamo Lawyers Challenge Government's Explanation For Hidden Microphone

By Charlie Savage

New York Times, March 12, 2018

Two lawyers who have represented a high-profile Guantánamo Bay detainee are contesting the government's portrayal of the events surrounding their team's discovery of a hidden microphone in the room where they regularly met with their client — an event that has led to a meltdown of the military tribunal case.

In a newly declassified account formally disclosed on Monday, the government acknowledged that the defense team for the detainee — Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a Saudi facing death penalty charges over Al Qaeda's bombing of the American destroyer Cole in 2000 — found a microphone in the room in August.

But the government statement also played down the discovery, saying that the microphone was only a "legacy" device left over from when that room had been used for interrogations, and was "not in use and not connected to any audio listening/recording device" when the lawyers met with their client there.

The two defense lawyers, however, said that account was missing several key details. There was no sign, they said, that the microphone was no longer connected to a listening or recording device somewhere else in the facility. And, they said, the government had never previously put forward that explanation in the five-month fight.

"This was the first we heard the claim, and that's part of the reason we don't believe it's true," said Richard Kammen, a civilian death-penalty specialist who quit the case along with two other civilian lawyers in October. "It appeared to us, as best as we could examine, to be a functional microphone. If it was really something that was out of use, they never said that in a classified filing — much less an unclassified one."

The Miami Herald first reported last week on the declassified statement, which prosecutors included in a court filing that has not yet been officially made public. The Pentagon publicly released the statement on Monday.

Mr. Nashiri was arraigned in 2011 over the Cole bombing, which killed 17 sailors. His case had dragged on through years of pretrial hearings until a military judge indefinitely shut it down last month because most of his defense lawyers had quit.

Although the details have been murky, the defense lawyers had made clear that they had found something that raised concerns about their ethical obligation to protect the confidentiality of their communications with their client. They also complained that they could not talk to Mr. Nashiri about it because the details were classified, and that the judge, Col.

Vance Spath of the Air Force, rejected their request for an evidentiary hearing to investigate the problem.

Colonel Spath and prosecutors have portrayed the mass resignation by the defense lawyers as essentially a stunt strategically timed to delay or derail the case, suggesting there was no basis for their concerns. Because the basic details were classified until recently, the defense lawyers have been limited in what they could say to rebut those accusations.

But the claim that the government had never previously put forward the explanation for the microphone sheds new light on the intensity of the recent sparring. Lt. Alaric Piette of the Navy, the only remaining lawyer representing Mr. Nashiri, also said the newly declassified statement was the first time the government said that the microphone was a legacy device and that a wire leading from it into the wall was not hooked up to anything.

"If you look at the microphone, there is no indication it is unhooked. If it is legacy, you can't tell," he said, adding, "We had not heard anything of this before."

The declassified statement and the interviews with the two defense lawyers also filled in other details about the highly disruptive incident in one of the most important war-crimes cases arising from the conflict with Al Qaeda.

For example, Mr. Kammen said Mr. Nashiri's defense team had already grown suspicious that its conversations with its client might be subject to surreptitious monitoring because of an earlier incident, although he said he could not describe it because its details might be classified.

"There was at least one episode, I'm comfortable saying, that absolutely caused us to believe that there was ongoing eavesdropping," he said.

In April 2017, the statement said, it came to light that confidential conversations involving other detainees and their lawyers elsewhere in the prison complex had been "unintentionally overheard." As a result, Brig. Gen. John Baker, who oversees military commissions defense lawyers, sent an email in June warning all defense lawyers of confidentiality problems.

Days after that email, Mr. Kammen said, the government told defense lawyers that everything related to General Baker's email was classified — a sweeping edict that raised their suspicions and prompted the search that found the microphone in August. After the discovery, the defense filed a classified motion asking Colonel Spath for an evidentiary hearing.

But the judge denied its request to investigate, finding that, as he put it in open court, "there wasn't any basis to find there had been an intrusion into attorney-client communications between this accused and this defense team." The judge also later dismissed their concerns as "fake news."

Both lawyers said they were puzzled by Colonel Spath, who has indicated he may retire. Lieutenant Piette said that at one point, when the judge declared there was no evidence to support defense concerns about confidentiality, he grew worried that maybe the judge only knew about the earlier incident involving other detainees and other lawyers.

During a break in the hearing, he said, he ran back to his office to verify that the defense had included a statement of facts about the microphone discovery with its classified filings.

Honduran Set For Guilty Plea In Florida Mall Bomb Plot Case

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

MIAMI (AP) – Court documents show a Honduran man is set to plead guilty in a plot to bomb a busy Florida mall food court in support of the Islamic State extremist group.

A federal judge has set a change of plea hearing Wednesday for 53-year-old Vicente Adolfo Solano, who previously pleaded not guilty. Court documents indicate Solano will plead guilty to a single count of attempting to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization, which carries a maximum 20-year prison sentence.

The FBI says Solano wanted to detonate a bomb last October at the Dolphin Mall near Miami, but was working with undercover FBI operatives who gave him a fake bomb before his arrest.

Despite Solano's claims of Islamic State sympathies, the FBI says no links to terrorist groups were found.

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Terror Suspect Competent For Trial In Chicago Bomb Plot

By Lorraine Bailey

Courthouse News, March 12, 2018

CHICAGO (CN) – A terrorism suspect accused of trying to set off a bomb at a bar in downtown Chicago is competent to stand trial after receiving a year and a half of psychiatric treatment, a federal judge ruled Monday.

Government and defense attorneys told U.S. District Judge Sharon Coleman on Monday afternoon that they agree terror suspect Adel Daoud can now stand trial, a year and a half after he was sent to a federal mental institution for treatment.

Based on the agreement of the parties, Coleman ruled from the bench that Daoud is competent for trial, setting in motion the wheels of prosecution that have been on hold since August 2016.

Daoud was 17 when he allegedly took the bait offered by undercover FBI agents posing as terrorists, who contacted him online about committing violent jihad attacks in the United States.

His 2012 indictment alleges one of these FBI correspondents put Daoud in touch with a "cousin," a man Daoud allegedly believed was a radical jihadist when they met in person six times.

Federal prosecutors say this undercover agent supplied Daoud with a fake bomb to destroy the target of his choice, and watched as Daoud unsuccessfully tried to detonate it inside the Jeep he parked in front of a bar in downtown Chicago. The agent immediately arrested Daoud.

He was scheduled to be tried in early 2017, but in mid-2016, Daoud sent letters to the court indicating he believed the entire justice system was controlled by the Illuminati, or "reptiles in disguise," and that his attorneys were Freemasons.

Based on this evidence and Daoud's own testimony, Coleman found him unfit to stand trial. She attributed his mental health decline to his lengthy periods spent in solitary confinement, coupled with the trauma of witnessing a cellmate's attempted and then successful suicide.

He has since been prescribed the powerful antipsychotic drug Abilify, used to treat schizophrenia, and participated in both one-on-one and group therapy sessions.

On Monday, both the government and defense attributed Daoud's return to competency to the effects of the medication.

Defense expert Dr. Steven Xenakis testified that Daoud now "tracks better in a conversation."

"He'll consider another opinion, and take redirection in a way he didn't before," Xenakis told the court.

Last year, Daoud was very agitated in interviews and would often have a "very odd look on his face," according to Xenakis, whereas Daoud was "much calmer, and had a more serious look on his face" in his most recent interview.

The psychiatrist testified that Daoud suffers from a "severe psychotic illness," but is competent to stand trial as long as he continues to take his medication.

Defense attorney Thomas Durkin told the court that Daoud would be able to keep taking his medication while in jail awaiting trial in Chicago, and he is currently housed with the general population, not in solitary confinement.

The government did not present any live testimony, but rested on the admission of its expert's report, which also found Daoud competent.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Bolling Haxall told the court that the expert's finding is "not an unusual result of the medication."

Daoud, now 24, still seemed like an adolescent in court Monday.

He repeatedly put his head down on the table as Xenakis testified, prompting his attorneys to nudge him to sit up. He often searched for his father in the audience, constantly tugged on his short beard, and sounded very nervous answering Judge Coleman's questions about whether he understood and knowingly waived his right to testify on his own behalf.

At the end of the hearing, Judge Coleman thanked Daoud's parents for being present.

The parties will next appear in court for a status hearing on April 11.

Canadian Who Plotted Terror Attacks Deserves Life In Prison: U.S. Prosecutors

By Peter Goffin

CTV News (CAN), March 12, 2018

American prosecutors are requesting a life sentence for a Canadian man who admitted to plotting terrorist attacks on New York City landmarks at the behest of a high-ranking Islamic State operative.

Abdulrahman El Bahnasawy, a 20-year-old from Mississauga, Ont., pleaded guilty in October 2016 to planning bombings and mass shootings at Times Square, in subway stations and at concert venues while still a teenager.

With his sentencing scheduled for April 9, American federal prosecutors have asked a judge to send El Bahnasawy to prison for life, in accordance with U.S. guidelines for punishing similar terror offences.

"El Bahnasawy's willingness to kill innocent civilians and martyr himself for ISIS, his absolute commitment to ISIS at the time of his arrest, and his deeply disturbing conduct since then ^{۱۴} powerfully support a single conclusion: the incapacitation of El Bahnasawy should be total and lifelong," U.S. prosecutor Geoffrey Berman said in a written submission filed to a New York federal court.

El Bahnasawy's lawyers have requested a sentence "no greater than necessary to comply with (the law)," and suggested he be released from custody in his mid-twenties, "when his cognitive development will be complete."

El Bahnasawy, a Canadian citizen who emigrated from Kuwait as a child, spent several months in treatment at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto in 2014, court documents show.

In a handwritten letter submitted to the court on March 2, El Bahnasawy apologized for his behaviour and asked for a "second chance," recounting his years of substance abuse, mental health issues and multiple suicide attempts.

"I want to experience life away from drugs and away from war and violence," he wrote. "I want a stable life and I want to stop having extreme turns that keep getting me in trouble, like my turn towards drugs or my turn towards jihad."

But Berman argued in his submission to the court that neither mental illness nor addiction justify, explain or mitigate El Bahnasawy's criminal actions.

"If anything, El Bahnasawy's asserted instabilities and addictive tendencies only further underscore the need for a sentence of life imprisonment to protect the public from a future attack or other criminal conduct by El Bahnasawy," Berman said.

Since being incarcerated in a New York corrections facility, El Bahnasawy has used opioids and marijuana multiple times, and "marked the walls of his prison cell with images and statements expressing his support for ISIS and terrorist attacks, and warning that more attacks were to come," Berman said in his submission.

One photo of El Bahnasawy's cell walls submitted to court shows a scrawled list of high-profile terror attacks, including 9/11 and the Boston Marathon bombing, encircled by what appears to be a heart and the words, "and more coming."

El Bahnasawy began communicating online with Islamic State followers in 2015, Berman said in his submission.

In 2016, at the request of a high-ranking member of the terror organization, El Bahnasawy began planning a suicide attack on New York that was to include the detonation of improvised explosive devices at Times Square and in subways, and mass shootings at concert venues, court documents show.

El Bahnasawy recruited other purported Islamic State sympathizers to help co-ordinate and carry out the attacks, including one man who, unbeknownst to him, was an undercover FBI agent.

On May 21, 2016, under the guise of taking a family vacation, El Bahnasawy, then 18, drove to Cranford, N.J., with his parents and sisters to set the attack in motion, unaware that he was being heavily monitored by U.S. law enforcement.

He was arrested by the FBI upon his arrival.

El Bahnasawy pleaded guilty in October 2016 to multiple offences that included conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction, conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism transcending national boundaries, conspiracy to bomb a public place and public transportation system and providing and attempting to provide material support.

Cops Say Terrorist Threat To Lakeside Mall Thwarted; Shelby Township Man, 20, Held

By Bill Laitner

Detroit Free Press, March 12, 2018

A Shelby Township man faces up to 20 years in prison after police said he sent text messages threatening to shoot up Lakeside Mall in Sterling Heights.

Tyler Tindell, 20, was arraigned Monday on a charge of making a terrorist threat, after investigators determined he'd sent text messages planning a mass shooting at the mall, police said.

Tindell was arrested Friday hours after three police departments began scrambling to locate him. The manhunt was launched after Shelby Township police "received a credible tip outlining a potential domestic terrorist act planned for Lakeside Mall," according to Shelby Township Deputy Chief Mark Coil. Tindell was arrested late Friday and police executed a search warrant at his home, finding one firearm, Coil said in a news release.

Held over the weekend, Tindell was given a bond of \$150,000 cash or surety bond — meaning he must post the full amount to gain freedom — by 41A District Court Judge Douglas Shepherd. Police would not describe or reveal the identity of the person to whom they said Tindell texted the threats.

Sterling Height Police Chief Dale Dwojakowski credited the cooperation of multiple police agencies in arresting the suspect and defusing the threat.

Shelby Township officers quickly began working in tandem with the Sterling Heights Police Department and the Macomb County's FBI Violent Crimes Task Force "to quickly locate the suspect," while officers from Sterling Heights police were sent to provide beef up security at Lakeside Mall and the surrounding area, Dwojakowski said in the release.

"At no time was the safety of anybody at Lakeside Mall in jeopardy" thanks to the close coordination of the three agencies, he said.

Last week, a 17-year-old Sterling Heights youth was arrested on the same charge of domestic terrorism for making threats against a local high school.

White Nationalist Group Discussed Detonating Explosive Device At Harrisburg Protest: Court Document

Harrisburg (PA) Patriot-News, March 12, 2018

WILLIAMSPORT — A white nationalist group in 2016 talked about detonating an explosive device at one of its events in Harrisburg to kill protestors.

That is the allegation contained in a legal brief assistant U.S. Attorney George J. Rocktashel filed Friday in U.S. Middle District Court in support of the charges against Justin Daniel Lough, a reputed member of the Aryan Strikeforce from Waynesboro, Va.

The prosecutor was replying to the claim by assistant public defender D. Toni Byrd that the charges against Lough and five co-defendants are based on a crime the government "manufactured." She was referring to the controlled methamphetamine and firearms transactions that are the basis of the charges in the indictment.

"Without the government and its supply of methamphetamine, machine gun parts and interested buyers there would be no crime," she wrote in a motion asking Judge Matthew W. Brann to dismiss the indictment against Lough.

Rocktashel's response was that well before that undercover investigation the FBI received information about illegal activity involving firearms and drugs in Potter County. Through state police and law enforcement sources, the FBI determined strikeforce members regularly traveled to the property of the organization's then president Ronald Pulcher for among other things weapons training, he stated. At one of those gatherings, according to cooperating witnesses, a plan was discussed to conceal a bomb inside the oxygen bottle of a strikeforce member who was terminally ill and willing to blow himself up, the document states.

Rocktashel defended the way evidence was gathered against the six, saying their illegal activities posed a serious risk to public safety. It required the use of investigative techniques, including undercover FBI employees who recorded meetings with Aryan Strikeforce members, he said.

The FBI staged a series of scenarios involving the controlled transfer of crystal methamphetamine and machine gun parts after it was learned strikeforce members were actively engaged in discussions of bomb making and drug and firearms trafficking, Rocktashel said. Transcripts made part of the court record confirm Lough and his confederates eagerly participated in the transfers knowing they were engaged in criminal activity, he said.

Meetings in Harrisburg were an integral part of the undercover operation, the transcripts show.

The following is information from them and Rocktashel's court filing: At a March 30, 2017, meeting at the El Rodeo restaurant on Jonestown Road, Lough expressed interest in obtaining an AK-47 rifle and a .380 caliber pistol. He also said he had stolen cars, committed robberies and cooked and distributed methamphetamine while in Arizona with a skinhead group known as the "Hammerskins." They left the restaurant and drove to the 4600 block of Locust Lane where Lough said he wanted as many guns as he could get. Enroute to Hagerstown, Md., with firearms parts following an April 7, 2017, meeting at a Dunkin Donuts in Harrisburg, another of those charged talked about nearly shooting a man.

According to that transcript, Henry Lambert Baird of Brown Mills, N.J., said he had pointed a gun at a white male who hanging around the group, but just as he pulled the trigger the intended victim pushed his away and the bullet missed. Rocktashel's court filing cites the following instances where violent acts were mentioned: In an exchange of messages on Oct. 10, 2016, a man calling himself "Eichmann Halcrow" discussed what to do about a female who had threatened strikeforce members. Pulcher suggested a prospective member hospitalize her as a form of initiation.

Pulcher is serving a state prison sentence after being arrested that October and charged with growing marijuana and possession of illegal firearms. He is not charged in the federal case.

The other instance was a fight with racial overtones at an Easton bar on Dec. 4, 2016, in which Baird, who succeeded Pulcher as president, and Joshua Michael Steever of Manville, N.J., were involved. Local police reports state that Steever walked past a group of African-American males, made racial slurs, was removed by the bouncer but returned with a knife. Steever was wearing his strikeforce bomber jacket.

The indictment alleges Steever, Baird, Lough, Jacob Mark Robards of Bethlehem, Stephen Davis of Bumpass, Va., and Connor Drew Dikes of Silver Spring, Md., were members of the Aryan Strikeforce and the Eastern Service Unit of Combat 18. Davis was vice president and Dykes sergeant of arms when they arrested last April. Steever is identified at the strikeforce founder. The court filing provides the following about those organizations:

Combat 18 refers to itself as the "official armed wing of Blood and Honour," a neo-Nazi organization started in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. "Combat 18 ascribed to the concept of leaderless resistance similar to lone wolves of small cell structures employed by other terrorist organizations and derived its name from A.H., the initials of Adolph Hitler, which are the first and eighth letters of the alphabet."

Pulcher is quoted as saying Combat 18 is the more violent faction within the white supremacy movement and the Aryan Strikeforce is an elite division within it.

A statement that all recruits take a blood oath pledging loyalty to the group, even if it means shedding blood, is attributed to him.

All six defendants have been detained pending trial.

NATIONAL SECURITY NEWS

Trump To Host Saudi Crown Prince At White House On March 20

By Justin Sink

Bloomberg News, March 12, 2018

President Donald Trump plans to meet with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Washington on March 20, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Monday.

"The president looks forward to strengthening ties between the United States and Saudi Arabia," Sanders said.

The meeting comes as the 32 year-old crown prince seeks to build a defense industry and has been looking beyond the kingdom's traditional Western allies for help. Prince Mohammed is aiming to have half of Saudi military procurement done locally by 2030, from about 2 percent now.

The Saudi government is already planning to buy the Russian S-400 air-defense system, under a deal that would let them manufacture related products at home. The prospect of more such agreements is likely to alarm American policy makers, who worry about losing ground to Russia and China in the Middle East.

Prince Mohammed and his father, King Salman, have sought to tighten their grip at home – consolidating powers that were once shared among an extended royal family. Senior princes and prominent businessmen were detained in November as part of a declared anti-corruption campaign. A new generation of bureaucrats close to the crown prince has been installed in senior posts.

Trump To Host Saudi Crown Prince At White House On March 20

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House says President Donald Trump will hold talks next week with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders says 32-year-old bin Salman – the heir apparent to King Salman – will visit the White House on March 20.

Sanders says Trump looks forward to discussing how to strengthen ties between the United States and Saudi Arabia, as well as how to advance common security and economic priorities.

Trump visited Saudi Arabia last year on his first foreign trip as president.

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Come To America, Mohammed Bin Salman. But Free These Activists First

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is on a mission to charm the West. The 32-year-old de facto leader of one of the world's largest oil producers paid a visit to Britain last week and is due in the United States next week. His supporters tout him as a bold modernizer who is moderating the severe Saudi version of Islam, granting greater freedoms to women and introducing desperately needed economic reforms. While other Arab states lean toward Russia, the crown prince appears eager to double down on Saudi bonds with the West.

All that is true to an extent, and welcome. Saudi women will finally be allowed to drive in June, and guardianship rules controlling them have been loosened. Religious police have been reined in, and cinemas are opening. The problem is that the liberalizing steps have been accompanied by even bolder acts of repression. Hundreds of Saudi businessmen and

princes were arrested late last year and forced to hand over billions of dollars in assets to Prince Mohammed or the government without due process. According to a report in the New York Times, at least 17 were hospitalized for physical abuse, and one, a major general, died.

Those in the West who support the cause of Saudi modernization, and businesspeople who may wish to invest in it, badly need reassurance. Fortunately, there is a ready way for the crown prince to offer it, even before he arrives in Washington: He can release some of the dozens of political prisoners who were jailed for advocating some of the very reforms he is attempting to advance.

Prime among them is Raif Badawi, a blogger and activist who challenged the religious establishment and advocated women's rights. He was arrested in 2012 and in 2014 was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes — 50 of which were cruelly delivered in a public square three years ago. In response to international protests, Saudi officials have hinted that Mr. Badawi could be pardoned, but he remains in prison. Now is the time to free him.

The same goes for members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, who called for political reforms and the reinterpretation of Islamic law. A court dissolved the group in 2013, and most of its members remain imprisoned. So, too, do Mohammed al-Otaibi and Abdullah al-Attawi, who were sentenced to long prison terms in January for founding a human rights organization, the Union for Human Rights, in 2013.

When The Post's David Ignatius asked the crown prince last month whether he would release some of the political detainees before his U.S. visit, the prince replied, "If it works, don't fix it." But if his modernizing is working, why does he need to imprison peaceful advocates of modernization? He should fix that before he arrives in Washington.

White House Expects North Korea Summit To Happen Despite Pyongyang's Silence

By Steve Holland, Christine Kim

Reuters, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Calm Before The Storm? North Korea Still Mum On Trump Summit

By Eric Talmadge

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

TOKYO (AP) — News of the planned summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un sent shockwaves around the globe. But in North Korea — as of Monday, several days after the announcement — not a word about it had been reported by the state-run media.

Pyongyang has been surprisingly quiet on the slew of momentous, and possibly even historic, events that have come in quick succession over the past few months.

It has essentially barred foreign media from visiting the country for more than a month and, while trumpeting the need for better inter-Korean relations, clung to the same anti-U.S., pro-nuclear weapons tone it struck at the height of its missile-testing frenzy last year.

Officials in Seoul say Pyongyang is keeping them in the dark as well.

"Regarding the North Korea-U.S. summit meeting, there hasn't been an official response by the North Korean government. So we think North Korea is having a cautious approach on the issue as it needs time to organize its stance," Unification Ministry spokesman Baik Tae-hyun said Monday.

It's not unusual for the North Korean media to take their time in getting out the news.

Because they are state-run, all newspapers, radio and television broadcasters and the official news agency are without fail on message. As Baik suggested, sometimes it takes a while to figure out what that message should be.

The North Korean government might have also been holding off because it's concerned the summit proposal could fall through, which could be hard to explain to their own public.

But as of Monday, the only official word of the North's offer of a summit with Trump in exchange for a moratorium on missile and nuclear tests had come from South Korea. The North's main newspaper, the Rodong Sinmun, which is run by the ruling party, had only put out a few paragraphs about a visit by senior South Korean officials last week.

It made no mention of any summit plans, let alone any conditions or statements on whether Kim is seriously mulling abandoning his nuclear weapons.

Though it warranted just a brief in the North's main newspaper, last week's meeting in Pyongyang was a big one.

It led to an agreement for Kim to have a summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-in next month. The same officials then carried to Washington a verbal message of Kim's willingness to meet Trump, which the U.S. president is said to have immediately accepted. The Trump-Kim summit is supposed to take place by May.

The lack of confirmation from Pyongyang has generated skepticism about how accurately Seoul and Washington are depicting Kim's intentions.

The silence on the summits was even more glaring because of how the North had played up the Olympic diplomacy that started it all off.

Kim used his nationally televised New Year's address to launch the first salvo of his new charm offensive, wishing for the success of the Pyeongchang Olympics and vowing 2018 would be a historic year for Koreans on both sides of

the Demilitarized Zone. The annual address is a major news event and Kim's biggest regular platform for making important policy announcements.

The North then grabbed the spotlight for several days at the Olympics by dispatching a made-for-the-cameras delegation of female cheerleaders, pop singers and even Kim's own younger sister, who managed to upstage a visit at the same time by U.S. Vice President Mike Pence. Photos of her with Moon were front-page news in the North.

Not a single story was written or broadcast about the performance of the North's athletes, however.

Their best finish was 13th, in pairs figure skating.

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White House To Present Proposals Tuesday On Gaza Crisis

By Barak Ravid Of Israel's Channel 10 News

Axios, March 12, 2018

Jared Kushner, U.S. special envoy Jason Greenblatt and officials from the National Security Council will present U.S. proposals for improving the humanitarian situation in Gaza tomorrow at a White House "brainstorming session", a senior White House official said.

The White House meeting, which was initiated by Kushner and Greenblatt, will be attended by many representatives from the international community including Israel and several Arab countries. The Palestinian Authority, which has cut off contacts with the White House over Trump's Jerusalem announcement, turned down an invitation.

The meeting is part of a new attempt by the international community to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Gaza and to try to improve living conditions for Palestinians there.

President Trump's Special envoy Jason Greenblatt, who will open the meeting at the White House tomorrow, said in a statement the Trump Administration believes that deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Gaza require immediate attention. He added:

"Solving the situation in Gaza is vital for humanitarian reasons, important for the security of Egypt and Israel and is a necessary step toward reaching a comprehensive peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, including Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank. The challenge will be determining which ideas can be realistically implemented in light of the fact that the Palestinians of Gaza continue to suffer under the authoritarian rule of Hamas."

Nearly 7 million Cubans, or 78.5% of eligible voters, participated in one-party parliamentary elections Sunday that will ultimately help choose the nation's next president, reports Telesur. Those elected to the 605 member National

Assembly will vote April 16 to choose a new Council of State, a 31-member executive body headed by the president.

Shortly after U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May announced that her government had "concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible" for the poisoning of a Russian ex-spy and his daughter on U.K. soil, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders declined to point the finger at Russia for the attack:

Between the lines: If the U.K. assessment is correct, the Kremlin did next to nothing to hide its culpability — using a nerve agent produced by the Russian government and leaving Sergei Skripal, the ex-spy, and his daughter nearly unconscious in a busy area. Per former Russia ambassador Michael McFaul, Putin "is taunting us, daring us to do nothing."

Palestinian Attendance Unclear At White House Gaza...

AFP, March 12, 2018

The White House will hold a conference on the humanitarian situation in Gaza on Tuesday, but it is unclear whether any Palestinian officials will attend.

President Donald Trump's "administration believes that deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Gaza require immediate attention," US special envoy Jason Greenblatt said in a statement announcing the conference.

The meeting is expected to include top White House aide Jared Kushner, National Security Council staff and "many of the relevant parties," according to Greenblatt.

It is unclear whether Palestinians officials will break their de facto boycott of US officials to attend.

The Palestinians were enraged by President Donald Trump's decision to break with long-standing US policy by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

"We are pleased with the committed list of attendees, which includes many of the relevant parties and anticipate a robust dialogue," said Greenblatt.

"The challenge will be determining which ideas can be realistically implemented in light of the fact that the Palestinians of Gaza continue to suffer under the authoritarian rule of Hamas."

A decade-long Israeli blockade and a dispute between Gaza's Islamist rulers and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authorities have brought the coastal territory's economy to its knees.

Israel has maintained a blockade of Gaza since 2007, which it says is necessary to isolate Hamas. The two sides have fought three wars since 2008.

Rights groups and UN officials say the blockade amounts to collective punishment and strangles the economy in the enclave, where unemployment is around 40 percent.

Britain Blames Russia For Nerve Agent Attack On Former Spy

By Ellen Barry And Richard Pérez-Peña

New York Times, March 12, 2018

LONDON — Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain said on Monday it was "highly likely" that Moscow was to blame for the poisoning of a former Russian spy who was attacked with a nerve agent near his home in southern England, and warned of possible reprisals.

Mrs. May's remarks, delivered in an address to Parliament, were an unusually direct condemnation of a country that Britain has, in the past, been loath to blame for attacks on its soil. The British authorities took what critics said were only modest countermeasures after when Russian agents poisoned a former MI6 informant in 2006 with a rare isotope, polonium 210.

The prime minister, who as home secretary resisted an open inquiry into Russia's role in that case, was under pressure to show more resolve this time. The March 4 nerve agent attack on Sergei V. Skripal, once an informant for Britain's foreign intelligence service, and his daughter, Yulia, occurred in and around public spaces in the city of Salisbury. It risked exposing hundreds of bystanders to a lethal chemical.

"It is now clear that Mr. Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent of a type developed by Russia," Mrs. May said in the House of Commons. "The government has concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible for the act against Sergei and Yulia Skripal."

She said that either the poisoning was a "direct act of the Russian state against our country" or that Moscow had lost control of its nerve agent and had allowed it to get into the hands of others. The prime minister said the government had summoned the Russian ambassador to demand an explanation, and that Britain expected a response from Russia by the end of the day on Tuesday.

"Should there be no credible response, we will conclude that this action amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom, and I will come back to this House and set out the full range of measures we will take in response," Mrs. May said.

"We shall not tolerate such a brazen act to murder innocent civilians on our soil."

Moscow has insisted that it played no role in the attack, and did so again on Monday.

"This is a circus show in the British Parliament," the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, told journalists in Moscow, according to the Interfax news agency.

Vladimir Dzhabarov, first deputy head of the Federation Council's foreign affairs committee, was equally dismissive.

Whatever Mr. Skripal may have once done, he said, he posed no threat to Russia now.

"This already is not our issue," Mr. Dzhabarov told Interfax. "He had access neither to our secrets nor facilities. He was of no use to us, to Russia in general."

Still, amid denials last week by Russia's foreign minister, Sergei V. Lavrov, an anchor on Russia's state-controlled news broadcast struck a different note, warning Russians not to betray their country. If they do, he said, "Don't choose Britain as a place to live."

Mrs. May said the nerve agent was part of a group known as Novichok — the Russian term for "newcomer." The chemical was produced by the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, and, at the time, was believed to be far more lethal than anything in the United States arsenal.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Vil Mirzayanov, a chemist who helped develop the agent, said that Soviet laboratories had developed enough of the substance to kill several hundred thousand people.

Dispersed in a powder, Novichok agents blocked the breakdown of a neurotransmitter controlling muscular contractions, leading to respiratory and cardiac arrest, Mr. Mirzayanov told investigators at the time.

Over the last week, chemical weapons experts fanned out through the sleepy cathedral city of Salisbury, and residents who may have been near Mr. Skripal and his daughter were told to wash their clothing and carefully wipe off other articles. Politicians have urged the government to respond.

"What it says to Russians living in the U.K. or those thinking of leaving the country is: Disloyalty is always punishable, you will never be free of us and you will never be safe, wherever you live," John Lough and James Sherr, Russia specialists at the British think-tank Chatham House, wrote. "What it says to the British government is: We believe you are weak, we have no respect for you."

Mr. Skripal is one of several opponents of President Vladimir V. Putin's government, in Britain and elsewhere, who have been the victims of murder or attempted murder. Western intelligence officials say that the Kremlin has frequently had its foes killed. The most notorious case involved another former Russian agent, Alexander Litvinenko, who was fatally poisoned in London in 2006 with a radioactive element, an assassination that a British inquiry later concluded was probably approved personally by Mr. Putin.

The British government has, however, been accused of dragging its feet in investigating previous suspicious deaths, for fear of losing its own intelligence flow from Moscow and sacrificing the Russian wealth that has flowed into London.

On Tuesday, Yvette Cooper, a lawmaker with the opposition Labour Party submitted a letter to Britain's home secretary, demanding a review of 14 deaths which "have not been treated as suspicious by the U.K. police but have —

reportedly — been identified by United States intelligence sources as potentially connected to the Russian state."

But with the intense attention focused on the poisoning of Mr. Skripal, 66, and his daughter, 33, the government response has been swifter.

Officials from across the British political spectrum have called for a wide range of retaliatory measures against Russia, including the expulsion of diplomats, new economic sanctions, tighter controls on wealthy Russians entering Britain, and the revocation of the broadcast license of RT, the Kremlin-controlled broadcaster.

Britain must ensure that Russia's oligarchs "realize that they can't spend their wealth in London, that they can't enjoy the luxuries of Harrods and whatever else, and that we're absolutely firm in making sure that they feel the pain of being denied entry into the West," Tom Tugendhat, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House of Commons, told BBC Radio on Monday.

But expelling Russian intelligence agents would mean that Britain would lose some of its own agents in Moscow, which would have steep costs for London, according to John Bayliss, who retired in 2010 from the Government Communications Headquarters, Britain's electronic intelligence agency.

"It will cut off a flow of intelligence you have had for years," he said. "That will stop you gaining intelligence in future years, which would be critical."

Mr. Skripal and his daughter remained in critical condition on Monday, more than a week after being poisoned in Salisbury, where Mr. Skripal had lived quietly for years. The pair were found incoherent on a park bench, and a police officer who made contact with the nerve agent when he tried to help the Skripals, Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, was also hospitalized in serious condition.

While working for Russian military intelligence, Mr. Skripal became a double agent, selling secrets to Britain. He was found out, convicted and sent to a Russian prison in 2006. In 2010, he was freed and sent to Britain in a spy swap with the West.

On Sunday, British authorities warned that hundreds of people might have been exposed, particularly in an Italian restaurant and a pub that the Skripals had visited. Officials advised nearby residents to carefully wash any items — clothes, eyeglasses, cellphones — that might have minute traces of the nerve agent on them, and to bag those that could not be cleaned easily. That prompted angry responses from Salisbury residents, who asked why it had taken a week to issue the warning.

The restaurant, pub and surrounding parts of the shopping district known as the Maltings remained cordoned off as emergency workers in protective suits combed through it for evidence and sought to remove all traces of the nerve agent.

U.K.'s May Says It Is 'Highly Likely' Russia Was Behind Skripal Poisoning

Prime minister says military-grade nerve agent developed in Russia was used in attack; responses under consideration

By Wiktor Szary

Wall Street Journal, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Theresa May: 'Highly Likely' Russia Responsible For Spy's Poisoning By Nerve Agent

By William Booth

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

LONDON — Prime Minister Theresa May said Monday that British investigators had concluded it was "highly likely" that Russia was responsible for the poison attack that left a Russian double agent and his daughter comatose on a park bench last week.

The British leader said the police had had identified the poison as a "military-grade nerve agent of a type developed by Russia."

She warned that Russia had either engaged in a direct attack against Britain or has lost control of the nerve agent it developed. Britain will not tolerate such a "brazen attempt to murder innocent civilians on our soil," she warned.

As she addressed the House of Commons, the British leader stopped short of announcing retaliatory actions, saying that she will give Russia a chance to respond to her government's findings and will return to Parliament on Wednesday with a plan for specific action.

In her remarks, May described the assault as a "reckless" and "indiscriminate," not only endangering the lives of its two principle victims, Sergei Skripal, 66, and his daughter Yulia, 33, but potentially exposing scores of others to the nerve agent.

Skripal was jailed in Russia in 2006 for selling state secrets to the British intelligence services but was released in 2010 as part of a high-profile spy swap. His daughter still lives in Russia, but has also spent long periods in England.

British authorities cordoned off a restaurant and pub near where the couple were found in downtown Salisbury, a quiet medieval town in south England, best known for its nearby ruins, Stonehenge.

Over the weekend, days after the initial attack on March 4, British public health officials advised anyone who had patronized the businesses during a two-day period to wash their clothes, double-bag articles for dry cleaning and wipe down items such as jewelry.

During her question-and-answer session in Parliament on Monday afternoon, members of May's government and

the opposition took turns denouncing the attack as a "murderous," brazen assault "without impunity" by "Russian mafia state."

May promised it would not be "business as usual," but that by Wednesday her government would offer up detailed measures, depending on what the Russians said.

In her remarks, May revealed that British investigators had concluded the chemical used in the attack was part of a group of Russian nerve agents known as "Novichok."

"Based on the positive identification of this chemical agent by world-leading experts at Porton Down, our knowledge that Russia has previously produced this agent and would still be capable of doing so, Russia's record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations, and our assessment that Russia views some defectors as legitimate targets for assassinations, the government has concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible for the act against Sergei and Yulia Skripal," she said.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was instructed to demand that the Moscow "immediately provide full and complete disclosure" of the Novichok program to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

President Vladimir Putin's government has strongly denied any involvement in the case and has responded by accusing Britain of stirring anti-Russian hysteria.

A BBC reporter quoted Putin Monday as saying, "Get to the bottom of things there, then we'll discuss this," when asked about the alleged poisoning.

Before May's address, the Russian Embassy in London said, "we are outraged by the anti-Russian media campaign, condoned by the government, that influences the investigation and has a psychological effect on British residents."

In its statement, Russia warned that the British government was playing "a very dangerous game" with public opinion and that this "unhelpful political track ... also bears the risk of more serious long-term consequences for our relations."

The Russian said that Russian nationals and others living in Britain are worried about their future there and that Russian journalists based in the U.K. are receiving threats.

On Monday a popular TV anchor on Russian state TV accused Britain of masterminding the poisoning of the former spy and his daughter to undermine Russia as it prepares to host of the soccer World Cup games this summer.

Dmitry Kiselyov, the broadcast journalist suggested it was all a plot to ruin the games for Russia and get British allies to boycott the World Cup.

"Why not poison him?" said Kiselyov. "Is he so valuable? And do it with his daughter to turn it into a real tear-jerker for the public."

White House Stops Short Of Blaming Russia For Sergei Skripal Poison Attack In UK

By Steven Nelson

Washington Examiner, March 12, 2018

White House press secretary Sarah Sanders stopped short of blaming Russia for a poison attack Monday, shortly after British Prime Minister Theresa May said it was "highly likely" Russia was responsible for the incident in southwest England.

"The attack was reckless, indiscriminate, and irresponsible," Sanders said at the daily White House press briefing.

But when pressed on responsibility, Sanders said only: "Right now we are standing with our U.K. ally. I think they are still working through even some of the details on that."

In an address to members of parliament, May said scientists determined that double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were poisoned on March 4 with a "military grade nerve agent of the type developed by Russia."

"The government has concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible for the act against Sergei and Yulia Skripal," May said.

But the British leader also equivocated and offered two other possibilities. "Either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country or the Russian government lost control of its potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others," she said.

Skripal and his daughter, who is 33 years old, were found unconscious on a public bench in Salisbury, England. They remain hospitalized. Several police officers who investigated the incident also were hospitalized and one remains in treatment.

Russia has denied committing the attack.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova called May's remarks a "circus show in the British parliament" and said, "Before making up new fairy tales, let the British disclose how the Litvinenko case ended." That seemed to be a reference to Alexander Litvinenko, the former Russian spy assassinated with polonium poisoning in the U.K. in 2006, an attack blamed on Russia.

British PM: Russia 'Highly Likely' Behind Ex-spy's Poisoning

By Jill Lawless And Danica Kirka

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

LONDON (AP) — Russia is "highly likely" to blame for poisoning a former spy and his daughter with a military-grade nerve agent, British Prime Minister Theresa May said Monday, demanding that Moscow give a compelling explanation or face "extensive" retaliation.

May told lawmakers in a strongly worded statement that without a credible response from Russia by the end of

Tuesday, Britain would consider the attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter in a quiet English city "an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom."

"There can be no question of business as usual with Russia," she said, without saying what measures Britain might take.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova dismissed May's allegations as a "circus show in the British Parliament."

Skripal, 66, and his 33-year-old daughter, Yulia, remain in critical condition after being found unconscious March 4 in Salisbury. A police detective who came in contact with them is in serious but stable condition.

May said British scientists have determined that Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with Novichok, a class of nerve agent developed by the Soviet Union near the end of the Cold War.

She said it was "highly likely" the substance came from Russia, and there were two possible explanations.

"Either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country, or the Russian government lost control of this potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others," she said.

May said Britain had given the Russian ambassador in London a deadline of Tuesday to explain which version is true. She said Russia must also "provide full and complete disclosure" of its Novichok program to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the oversight body for the international chemical weapons convention.

May spoke in the House of Commons after she chaired a National Security Council meeting to hear the latest evidence in the case. She has been under mounting pressure to hit Russia with sanctions, diplomatic expulsions and other measures in response to the poisoning, the latest in a string of mysterious mishaps to befall Russians in Britain in recent years.

May said Britain would consider tough action if Russia's explanation is inadequate, though she didn't give details.

She said Britain would be prepared to take "much more extensive measures" than the expulsions and limited sanctions imposed after the death of former Russian agent Alexander Litvinenko, who was poisoned by drinking tea laced with radioactive polonium in London in 2006.

"We will not tolerate such a brazen attempt to murder innocent civilians on our soil," May added.

The White House said the use of the nerve agent "is an outrage" but wasn't ready to say that Russia was responsible.

Spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders called the poisoning "reckless, indiscriminate and irresponsible," adding that the U.S. stands by its ally.

British opposition lawmakers are urging the adoption of a version of the United States' Magnitsky Act, a law allowing authorities to ban or seize the assets of individuals guilty of

human rights abuses. It is named for Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who died in a Russian prison after exposing a \$230 million fraud involving organized crime and a Russian government official in 2008.

Critics of the British government say the U.K.'s response to Russian wrongdoing has been muted because London's property market and financial sector are magnets for billions in Russian money.

James Nixey, head of the Russia program at think-tank Chatham House, said Britain has for years avoided tough decisions about Russia.

"There has been a lot of tough talk over the years and almost no action to protect our national security and integrity," he said. "We have sent mixed signals to Russia. We have talked tough by calling it names and expressing our dislike of the regime, but at the same time we have been very much open for business with Russia, of any kind."

He said May will have a difficult decision on Wednesday, when she has to spell out how Britain will respond.

Alastair Hay, professor emeritus of environmental toxicology at the University of Leeds, said May's remarks amounted to "saying that Britain has been attacked with chemical weapons."

Noting that Russia had previously announced it had destroyed all of its stocks of chemical weapons, Hay said May's remarks raised "a whole new set of questions: Des Russia have another kind of chemical weapons program that it hasn't declared?"

Many see echoes between the Skripal case and the killing of Litvinenko, which a British inquiry concluded was the work of the Russian state, probably on the orders of President Vladimir Putin.

The Kremlin has denied involvement in Litvinenko's death, and it dismissed claims it was behind the attack on the Skripals.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that Sergei Skripal worked for British intelligence and was poisoned on British soil, and therefore the incident "has nothing to do with Russia, let alone the Russian leadership."

Skripal was a Russian military intelligence officer when he was recruited to spy for Britain in the 1990s. He was jailed in Russia in 2006 for revealing state secrets before being freed in a spy swap in 2010. He had settled in Salisbury, 90 miles (140 kilometers) southwest of London.

Almost 200 troops, including soldiers trained in chemical warfare and decontamination, have been deployed to Salisbury to assist the police investigation into where the nerve agent came from and how it was delivered.

British officials have said the risk to the public is low, but urged people who visited the Zizzi restaurant or Mill pub, where the Skripals went before their collapse, to wash their

clothes as a precaution. Some have questioned why it took health authorities a week to issue the advice.

Andy Harder, 63, who works in a coin and stamp collector's shop in Salisbury, was in the Mill pub the day after the Skripals fell ill and before police cordoned off the area.

Harder said he washed his jacket off with an antiseptic cleaner after authorities gave the guidance Sunday.

"So I've washed all my clothes, I've taken my jacket and done that with Dettol — I mean I don't know what to use, really," he said, referring to a brand of disinfectant. "That's supposed to kill most things. I've had a good scrub up, so it should be OK."

Kirka reported from Salisbury, England. Gregory Katz in London, and Jim Heintz and Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow contributed.

An earlier version of this story misspelled the nerve agent Novichok.

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Tillerson Says Russia 'Likely Responsible' For Ex-spy's Poisoning

Reuters, March 12, 2018

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Tillerson Blasts Russia Over Alleged Nerve Agent Attack In U.K.

By Nahal Toosi

Politico, March 12, 2018

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Monday slammed Russia over an alleged nerve agent attack in Britain — going further than the White House in directly calling out the Kremlin as "an irresponsible force of instability in the world."

Tillerson said the United States will stand "in solidarity" with the United Kingdom and would coordinate its response to the attack. At least two people, former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, have been left extremely sick due to the alleged nerve agent.

Tillerson's decision to take a harsher tone than the White House is the latest example of the Trump administration's struggle to coordinate its overall foreign policy message. That differences have been especially obvious when it comes to Russia, whose government President Donald Trump has been loathe to criticize and which is suspected of interfering in the 2016 presidential election on his behalf.

British Prime Minister Theresa May said Monday it was "highly likely" that the Kremlin was responsible for the nerve agent attack and that the substance was a type known to be developed by Russia. She suggested that the Russian government carried out the attack or it had allowed the dangerous material to fall into the hands of others. She demanded that Russian President Vladimir Putin explain how the military-grade substance ended up on U.K. soil.

The Russian government has denied the allegations.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders offered the Trump administration's "fullest condemnation" on Monday, but she did not go as far as May in assigning blame to Russia.

In remarks to reporters while traveling in Africa, Tillerson said the attack was a "really egregious act." At that point, the secretary said it was not clear whether the Russian government itself was behind the attack or whether it was a non-state actor. It was "almost beyond comprehension" that a state actor would take such a step given that it could potentially harm many people, Tillerson said.

But in a statement issued later in the day, Tillerson said the United States has "full confidence" in the British assessment that Russia was "likely responsible."

"There is never a justification for this type of attack — the attempted murder of a private citizen on the soil of a sovereign nation — and we are outraged that Russia appears to have again engaged in such behavior," Tillerson said in the statement. "From Ukraine to Syria — and now the U.K. — Russia continues to be an irresponsible force of instability in the world, acting with open disregard for the sovereignty of other states and the life of their citizens."

He added: "We agree that those responsible — both those who committed the crime and those who ordered it — must face appropriately serious consequences. We stand in solidarity with our allies in the United Kingdom and will continue to coordinate closely our responses."

Trump has struck a notably softer tone than Tillerson when it comes to Russia. He has dismissed the U.S. intelligence community's assessment that Russia interfered in the 2016 campaign to help him win, and he has repeatedly talked about the need to find common ground with Putin. His administration also has held back on imposing sanctions passed into law by Congress.

While Tillerson has tried to patch up fraying ties with Russia, he nonetheless has been more vocal than the president in criticizing some of Russia's actions overseas, including its aggression in Ukraine and its role in the Syrian conflict.

In comments while in Africa, Tillerson, a former ExxonMobil CEO who knows Putin well, said he'd become "extremely concerned about Russia" and acknowledged that the past year's worth of attempts to improve the relationship with Moscow "didn't get very far."

"Instead what we've seen is a pivot on their part to be more aggressive," Tillerson said. "And this is very, very concerning to me and others that there seems to be a certain unleashing of activity that we don't fully understand what the objective behind that is."

Skripal had reportedly acted as an informant for British intelligence. The attack on him and his daughter is believed to have occurred March 4 and possibly exposed any number of other people to danger in the city of Salisbury.

May faces pressure to take substantive action against Russia. When she was the home secretary, she resisted an open inquiry into the fatal poisoning in 2006 of another ex-Russian spy, Alexander Litvinenko.

Russia 'Highly Likely' Behind Ex-spy's Poisoning: British Prime Minister

By Kim Hjelmggaard

[USA Today](#), March 12, 2018

LONDON — British Prime Minister Theresa May said Monday that Russia was "highly likely" behind last week's poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, with a military-grade nerve agent.

May's statement to Parliament marks the first time the British government publicly accused the Kremlin of being behind the attack.

"Either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country, or the Russian government lost control of this potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get in the hands of others," May said.

May summoned Russia's ambassador in London and gave him until Tuesday to explain what happened.

Skripal, 66, and his daughter, 33, remain in a critical condition following the March 4 incident in Salisbury, about 90 miles west of London. They were found unconscious on a park bench after a shopping trip.

Russia has strongly rejected suggestions that it might be behind the poisoning.

In her statement, May said Britain was ready to take "extensive measures" against Moscow if it does not get a satisfactory explanation. Otherwise, Britain will consider the incident "an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom," she said.

British media described the "extraordinary measures" as possible sanctions.

Skripal was jailed in Russia in 2006 after he confessed to being recruited by British intelligence and supplying information about Russian agents. He was freed in 2010 as part of a U.S.-Russian spy swap and moved to Britain.

While it is not clear why Skripal was targeted, his poisoning is reminiscent of the 2006 poisoning death of another former Russian agent, Alexander Litvinenko, after he

was exposed to a rare radioactive isotope, polonium-210, at a London hotel.

An official British inquiry concluded in 2016 that Russian President Vladimir Putin probably approved the assassination of Litvinenko.

The chemical identified in the attack against Skripal is part of a group of nerve agents first developed in the former Soviet Union and known as "Novichok, or "newcomer" in English. It is extremely potent.

Putin, asked by a British reporter Monday if Russia was behind the poisoning, said in comments carried by Russian news wires: "You first get to the bottom of things over there, and after that we can discuss it." Russia's foreign ministry referred to May's allegation as a "circus show in the British Parliament."

On Sunday, police advised around 500 people near the Skripals when they visited a pub and restaurant to wash their possessions as a precautionary measure. Trace amounts of the nerve agent were found on a table where they had lunch.

UK's May Says 'Highly Likely' Russia Behind Nerve Attack On Spy

By Alistair Smout, Michael Holden

[Reuters](#), March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

All Of Putin's Poisons

What other chemical weapons does Moscow possess?

[Wall Street Journal](#), March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Vladimir Putin's Toxic Reach

[New York Times](#), March 12, 2018

Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain declared an end to a mystery that was really no mystery. It was "highly likely," Mrs. May said on Monday, that a former Russian spy and his daughter were poisoned in Salisbury, England, by Russian agents in an "indiscriminate and reckless" attack.

The attack on the former spy, Sergei Skripal, who worked for British intelligence, and his daughter Yulia, in which a police officer who responded was also poisoned, was no simple hit job. Like the 2006 murder of Alexander Litvinenko, another British informant, who was poisoned with radioactive polonium 210, the attack on Mr. Skripal was intended to be as horrific, frightening and public as possible. It clearly had the blessing of President Vladimir Putin, who had faced little pushback from Britain in the Litvinenko case.

The blame has been made clearer this time and this attack on a NATO ally needs a powerful response both from

that organization and, perhaps more important, by the United States.

Mr. Putin has faced little backlash for actions even bolder than the gruesome intrigues in Britain, like the attacks by Russian forces in Ukraine and Syria. With growing support from autocratic forces in Europe, he must not be emboldened to think he will be unchecked. While President Trump has allowed Mr. Putin a free hand to meddle in American politics, he cannot ignore yet another attempted murder of a Putin foe on allied soil. The administration needs to enforce sanctions Congress has already passed and press NATO to do more, perhaps banning travel by Putin cronies and enacting other restrictions on business activities.

But while Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, said the administration was "standing with our U.K. ally," she would not say whether it thought Russia was responsible for the attack.

The Russians knew that the British would identify the nerve agent, leaving no doubt who was behind the killing. That makes Mr. Putin's typically cynical treatment of the killing doubly outrageous. When the British "sort out" the killing, he said nonchalantly, then he will comment on it. At the same time his top propagandist on state television, Dmitry Kiselyov, was feeding the outlandish story that Britain poisoned Mr. Skripal to create a pretext for boycotting the 2018 World Cup tournament in Russia. Why would Russia bother to go after a double agent of no use to either side, Mr. Kiselyov sarcastically wondered?

Not to silence him, presumably, because the Russians themselves had released him to Britain in 2010 in a swap for a network of sleeper agents rounded up in the United States. The likely answer was provided by Mr. Putin himself a few months after Mr. Skripal was traded to the West. Asked during his annual give-and-take with reporters in 2010 how he would treat treason, Mr. Putin, a former K.G.B. agent, replied: "Traitors will kick the bucket, trust me. These people betrayed their friends, their brothers in arms. Whatever they got in exchange for it, those 30 pieces of silver they were given, they will choke on them."

Mrs. May demanded that Russia immediately provide complete disclosure of the Novichok gas program to the Organization on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Then she said the government was drawing up a full range of retaliatory options.

These could range from expelling some Russian diplomats, as Britain did after Mr. Litvinenko's poisoning in 2006, to stronger sanctions. The trouble is that Russia probably doesn't much worry about diplomatic expulsions, and British sanctions would add little to the broad range of Western sanctions already in place over the annexation of Crimea.

Yet if Russia's message is that no "traitor" is safe anywhere, it should be in the interest of every nation to send

an indelible message to Mr. Putin that he cannot deploy his weapons of war anywhere he wants.

U.S. Braces For Return Of Terrorist Safe Havens To Afghanistan

By Helene Cooper

New York Times, March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON — For 17 years, three successive presidents have told the American public that above all else, Afghanistan must never again provide "safe haven" to terrorist groups seeking to harm the United States and its interests.

But Defense Department and intelligence officials now say exactly that may be on the verge of happening.

With the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in its twilight, American officials are tracking foreign fighters veering to provinces in Afghanistan's north and east. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda remains a persistent and deadly threat across the country, a senior American general told senators last week.

And a report published in November by the Institute for the Study of War flatly stated that Afghanistan is "a safe haven for terrorist plots against the U.S. homeland."

Afghan officials believe there are now an estimated 3,000 Islamic State fighters in Afghanistan. Last week, the Islamic State in Khorasan released a video promoting Jowzjan Province in Afghanistan's north and Nangarhar Province in the east as the next spot for Islamic extremists to establish a caliphate now that the group has been routed from its de facto capital in Syria.

Titled "The Land of Allah Is Vast," the 25-minute video bragged about the strength of the Islamic State contingent that has taken safe haven in Tora Bora and Wazir Tanki, districts in Nangarhar Province that are both close to Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. It also mocked President Trump for using the so-called mother of all bombs, the largest conventional bomb in the American arsenal, in an unsuccessful effort last April to clear Islamic State fighters from a cave complex in nearby Achin district.

"From the mountains of Tora Bora, we send the glad tidings to the caliph of the Muslims, of the return of the caliphate to this area that was swarming with immigrants and supporters who fought for the caliphate to be established," a narrator intoned in the video, posted by the Washington-based SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors terrorist organizations.

Sweeping footage from the video showed militants training, fighting, eating and praying in remote Afghan areas.

In its report, the Institute for the Study of War found that the Islamic State was planning attacks in the United States from safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It said that residents in Jowzjan Province reported in November that

Islamic State extremists from France, Sudan, Chechnya, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were recruiting fighters and training child suicide bombers.

American military officials confirmed that the Islamic State, as well as the Taliban, has now established training camps in Jowzjan Province.

In October, the Justice Department unsealed charges against three Islamic State operatives in a plot for coordinated attacks in New York in summer 2016. Two of the men, according to the charges, said they were working with the Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan; one said he received authorization from the Afghanistan group for the planned attacks.

Most of the concerns about safe havens focus on the Islamic State's move into Afghanistan.

The Islamic State, a successor to Al Qaeda in Iraq, has joined a battle for turf and power among about 20 terrorist groups in Afghanistan, many of them with designs on the West. Together, they make up the highest concentration of extremist groups worldwide among 98 that have been designated as terrorist organizations by the United States or the United Nations, according to Gen. John W. Nicholson, the commander of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Many experts say that General Nicholson's data may be conflated. Yet no one questions that the number of terrorist groups in Afghanistan has increased sharply in recent years — despite the 17-year presence of American troops.

"The Afghanistan war is almost old enough to vote, and we have more groups that want to launch attacks against the U.S. operating there than we did when we started," said Caitlin Forrest, an Afghanistan expert with the Institute for the Study of War.

This was not supposed to happen.

Weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks, President George W. Bush sent a small group of Special Operations troops into Afghanistan. Ever since, top officials have repeatedly justified the war as necessary to ensure that Afghanistan never again allows safe haven for groups that targeted American interests.

"Afghanistan provided safe haven for Al Qaeda," Mr. Bush said during a 2006 news conference. "That's where they trained. That's where they plotted. That's where they planned the attacks that killed thousands of innocent Americans."

President Barack Obama picked up that mantle when he took office, sending a surge of American troops there in 2009 before declaring the end of the combat mission in Afghanistan a few years later. "As president and commander in chief, I've made it clear that I will not allow Afghanistan to be used as safe haven for terrorists to attack our nation again," Mr. Obama said on July 6, 2016.

Mr. Trump has struck a similar note. "We are committed to ensuring that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists who want to commit mass murder of our citizens," Mr. Trump said in August, announcing a strategy to send an additional 4,000 American troops to the country.

But as the Islamic State in Khorasan has surged under Mr. Trump, and the Taliban and Haqqani networks have continued relentless attacks on civilian and military targets in Afghanistan, American officials have increasingly warned that safe havens are back.

Administration officials cited a huge concern at United States Central Command, which largely runs the war in Afghanistan, about the return of safe havens. Russia is also worried that an increased Islamic State presence in Afghanistan will further radicalize the Caucasuses; as a result, according to Central Command officials, Moscow began supporting the Taliban as a counterweight, sending its fighters weapons and night vision goggles.

At a Senate hearing last week, Lt. Gen. Robert P. Ashley, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said the Islamic State in Khorasan intended to "expand ISIS' self-declared caliphate and compete with the Taliban for recognition as the dominant militant group in the region."

He also said that Al Qaeda had "retained the intent and limited capability to threaten coalition and Afghan forces and interests in the region," a reference to the American-led NATO coalition that has been fighting in Afghanistan.

The official line at the Pentagon is that the textbook definition of "safe havens" — where insurgent groups can plan and conduct operations without disruption by significant external factors like arrest and airstrikes — has not quite been re-established in Afghanistan.

Military officials said American and Afghan forces were doing just enough to pressure training camps and strongholds that the Islamic State had built in remote and ungoverned areas of the country. One high-profile example of that, Central Command officials said, was the "MOAB" — the massive GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast, nicknamed the "mother of all bombs," that General Nicholson ordered against the Islamic State cave complex.

But how the largest American conventional weapon came to be deployed, some 16 years after Mr. Bush first vowed that Afghanistan would never again provide safe haven to terrorist groups plotting against the United States, says much about the difficulties of keeping that pledge.

One year ago, after Islamic State insurgents seized a series of towns and villages in the east, American and Afghan Special Operations forces responded with Operation Hamza to take back the territory. In its initial stage, American commandos helped run the extremists from the area. But officers in the Afghan 201st Corps at the nearby Tactical Base Gamberi were reluctant to secure the territory to keep the extremists from returning.

"They did not have the appetite to go into southern Nangarhar and fight Daesh," said Maj. Richard Anderson, an American operations adviser to the 201st Corps, using another name for the Islamic State. During a fight a month earlier, the 201st Corps lost 16 men in one night.

So General Nicholson ordered that the huge bomb be dropped on Achin. Though it did initially clear the area of Islamic State fighters, many have since returned. And Afghan troops have urged American commanders to simply drop more bombs instead of launching ground battles.

"They said: 'You dropped the MOAB. Why don't you just drop another MOAB?'" Major Anderson recalled in an interview at Gamberi in August.

But securing territory — generally with constant patrols and ground intelligence — is necessary to prevent safe havens from being created. And now, Afghan and American officials said, the same area that was obliterated by the United States' biggest conventional bomb is once again being used by extremists to plot attacks against the Afghan government and the West.

Taliban Briefly Take Afghan District As Security Worsens

By Mujib Mashal And Taimoor Shah

New York Times, March 12, 2018

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban briefly captured a district in western Afghanistan on Monday, officials said, as security continued to deteriorate in the besieged province of Farah.

The fall of the district, Anardarah, came days after the Afghan security forces suffered heavy casualties in another district of Farah, which borders Iran and is situated along one of the country's most lucrative drug routes.

Afghan and Western officials warn that the country's security could further deteriorate in the coming year, even as the American military finds itself drawn deeper into the war, with additional military advisers arriving to help Afghan forces. The Taliban have yet to show any interest in a comprehensive peace offer made recently by the Afghan government.

Dadullah Qani, a member of the Farah provincial council, said Taliban fighters stormed Anardarah district, which used to be a safe area, and overran a number of government compounds early on Monday.

Additional troops that were later sent in retook the district and pushed the Taliban back out, said Nasrat Rahimi, a spokesman for the Afghan Interior Ministry.

"They lost 56 fighters and a dozen of them were wounded," Mr. Rahimi said of the Taliban. "Of our forces, I can confirm eight men were killed and 13 wounded."

Mohammad Naseer Mehri, a spokesman for the governor of Farah, said that the attack began around 4 a.m.

and that the Taliban had managed to enter the governor's compound and seize it.

"We sent more troops to the district and also called in air power to take part in ongoing fighting to halt the Taliban's progress," Mr. Mehri said.

As the Taliban have gained territory in recent years, Farah has become a greater concern for the Afghan government. The province has repeatedly been on the verge of falling, with insurgents on several occasions managing to enter the provincial capital, Farah City.

"None of the districts in Farah are completely under Taliban control, but we can say that all of the districts are contested," said Farid Bakhtawar, the head of the provincial council.

The insurgents control 3 percent of Afghanistan's 407 districts, and influence or contest an additional 40 percent, according to estimates in a report by the Office of Inspector General of the United States Department of Defense. The Afghan government, by contrast, controls 18 percent of the country and influences 38 percent more.

On Friday, Afghan soldiers on a clearance operation in the Bala Boluk district of Farah came under heavy Taliban fire. Mr. Bakhtawar said that at least 18 Afghan soldiers, eight of them commandos, had been killed in the attack and that three others had been taken captive by the Taliban.

Mohammed Radmanish, a spokesman for the Defense Ministry, said, however, that seven commandos and two regular army soldiers had been killed in the attack and two others wounded. He said that 31 Taliban had been killed.

"As you know, we have too many problems in Farah Province. Intense fighting continues in the province, and the enemy suffered heavy casualties in this fighting," Mr. Radmanish said. "Our forces also suffered casualties in the fighting — this is war, both sides suffer."

American officials have warned that the country's security situation could further deteriorate in the coming year, adding to further political instability. The Afghan government, marred by infighting, has struggled to hold long delayed elections, and it faces an increasingly vocal opposition.

"The overall situation in Afghanistan probably will deteriorate modestly this year in the face of persistent political instability, sustained attacks by the Taliban-led insurgency, unsteady Afghan National Security Forces performance, and chronic financial shortfalls," Dan Coats, the director of national intelligence, told the United States Senate last week.

Mr. Coats said Afghan forces "probably will maintain control of most major population centers with coalition force support, but the intensity and geographic scope of Taliban activities will put those centers under continued strain."

President Trump, under his new strategy for the region, has expanded the presence of American military advisers in Afghanistan by a few thousand troops, making more available to work with the Afghan forces at a smaller unit level.

Capt. Tom Gresback, a spokesman for the United States military in Afghanistan, said new specialized units were arriving to assist Afghan forces at the battalion level across the country. Already, about 800 such service members — many of whom have done previous tours in Afghanistan and have received specific training for this kind of mobile advisory mission where they will be sent from one part of the country to the next — have arrived.

"We are in the process of deploying them throughout the country," Captain Gresback said.

Officials in northern Afghanistan said that already more American advisers were arriving to help in the battle.

Said Sarwar Hussain, a spokesman for the Afghan police in the north of the country, said a unit of about 300 American special forces would be based in the restive province of Faryab.

"They will advise in our operations and assist with air power," Mr. Hussaini said, adding that "120 of them have arrived by air, and the rest are waiting for the main highway to be cleared before they go to Faryab."

Violence also continued in the east of the country. In the Bati Kot district of Nangarhar Province, Afghan officials said Taliban fighters had opened fire on a civilian vehicle, killing seven members of the same family, three men and four women. But the Taliban denied they were behind the attack.

Qari Khanistan, a relative of the family, said those in the vehicle, a Toyota Corolla wagon, were headed to a funeral in the next village when the Taliban stopped them on suspicion of being government employees.

"They fired rockets at the vehicle, which caught fire, and all of them were martyred except for two who were wounded," he said.

Mr. Khanistan said that in protest, relatives took the victims' bodies to the Taliban's military command in the region to show that it was civilians they had killed.

And in neighboring Kunar Province, officials said the Taliban had loaded explosives onto a donkey and detonated them when the animal reached a police check post, wounding two officers.

U.S. Warns It May Act On Syria As Onslaught Against Ghouta Grinds On

By Michelle Nichols, Suleiman Al-Khalidi

Reuters, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

U.S. Prepared For Military Action In Syria If United Nations Doesn't Stop The Bloodshed, Haley Warns

By Carol Morello

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

The United States is "prepared to act if we must" to stop indiscriminate bombing of civilians in Syria, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley warned Monday as she circulated a new draft resolution demanding an immediate cease fire.

Addressing the Security Council 16 days after it passed a resolution demanding a cease fire that largely has failed to stop the bombing or allow humanitarian access, Haley compared the situation today to last year when the United States launched airstrikes against a Syrian military base after a deadly chemical weapons attack.

"When the international community consistently fails to act, there are times when states are compelled to take their own action," Haley said.

This is one of those times, she added.

"We warn any nation determined to impose its will through chemical attacks and inhuman suffering, but most especially the outlaw Syrian regime, the United States remains prepared to act if we must," she said. "It is not a path we prefer. But it is a path we have demonstrated we will take, and we are prepared to take again."

French President Emmanuel Macron also threatened targeted strikes in Syria, telling reporters at a news conference in India that France would retaliate if it found "irrefutable evidence" chemical weapons had been used to kill civilians.

Earlier in the Security Council, U.N. Secretary General António Guterres said the bombing and bloodshed in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta, a rebel stronghold, had increased since the council called for a cease fire. Only a limited number of convoys delivering medical supplies and food have succeeded in reaching civilians — and Syrian government forces confiscated most of the equipment on one load, he said. And not a single critically ill person has been evacuated.

Calling the situation a calamity growing more desperate by the day, Guterres said the Syrian government and its allies — an oblique reference to Russia and Iran — had intensified their offensive so much that they have increased the territory they control in the enclave from 10 percent barely a week ago to 60 percent today.

"We have seen nothing but carnage in response to the Security Council's resolution calling for a halt to the massacre in Eastern Ghouta," says Arnaud Quemin, the Mercy Corps director of programs in Syria. "Conditions worsen each day. People are fleeing from one shelter to another as the front lines move."

Last month's cease fire was passed with the support of Russia, but only after modifications were made allowing military strikes against "terrorist" groups. The government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad takes an expansive view of

that designation to include not only al-Qaeda and the Islamic State but also rebel opposition groups.

Haley accused Syria, Russia and Iran of using that loophole to bomb hospitals and schools and to "continue starving and pummeling hundreds of thousands of innocent Syrian civilians."

She vowed to close any room for evasion, though it is unclear how it could win the backing of Russia, which has used its veto power to protect the Syrian government in the past.

"It is simple, straightforward and binding," she said of the U.S. resolution. "It will take effect immediately upon adoption by this council. It contains no counterterrorism loopholes for Assad, Iran and the Russians to hide behind."

Asked about the Syrian conflict at a news conference in India, Macron said France would be ready to strike if it found "irrefutable evidence" chemical weapons had been used to kill.

Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, mocked the number of times his country was mentioned during the debate — counting 22 times by Haley, 16 times by the French envoy and 12 by the British representative.

He defended the Syrian government, saying they "have the right to remove the threat to the safety of its citizens. The suburbs of Damascus cannot remain a hotbed of terrorism."

Syria's U.N. ambassador, Bashar Jaafari, said terrorists had conducted chemical attacks on civilians and staged it to make it look like the Syrian military was to blame. He faulted foreign governments for supporting some rebels.

"Isn't it enough what they've done in Vietnam, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen, invoking very cheap lies?" he said.

He ended by quoting Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz: "They are liars. They know they are liars. And they know that we know they are liars. However, they still lie, and very loudly so."

U.S. Woman Trapped In Syria's Ghouta Wants Action From Trump

By Bassem Mroue

Associated Press, March 12, 2018

BEIRUT (AP) — An American woman living in the besieged suburbs of the Syrian capital on Monday called on President Donald Trump to put more pressure on Russia to "stop bombing us" amid an air and ground assault by government forces that has killed more than 1,000 people over the past three weeks.

Deana Lynn, from Detroit, Michigan, and her family are among nearly 400,000 people who are trapped in eastern Ghouta, surviving on limited amounts of food and spending most of their time squeezed into underground shelters. Lynn moved to eastern Ghouta with her Syrian husband in 2000, to be close to his elderly parents.

The mother of eight — seven daughters and one son — has been working as an English-language teacher in a town in eastern Ghouta that she prefers not to disclose for safety reasons. But since Feb. 18, when government forces began their latest assault, Lynn and her family have been mostly staying in the basement, rarely emerging for fear they might be struck by shelling or airstrikes.

"It's been horrifying, especially (that) I have small children and grandchildren," the 44-year-old woman told The Associated Press via the WhatsApp messaging service.

Lynn met her husband in the 1990s while she was studying English literature at the University of Michigan and he was on a visit to the United States. Five of their eight children were born in the U.S., while their four grandchildren were all born in Syria.

"We've been taking shelter in basements. We go up and downstairs," she said. "We go upstairs to eat, to cook. We have to go upstairs to use the bathroom."

The Ghouta region was among the first to rise up against President Bashar Assad after protests erupted in March 2011, and it fell into the hands of opposition fighters in 2012. The following year, the army and allied militias surrounded eastern Ghouta from all sides. The enclave has been under an ever-tightening siege since then.

Over the past three weeks, government forces backed by Russian warplanes launched an all-out offensive, capturing more than half of eastern Ghouta from rebels.

"Right now we're eating whatever is available," Lynn said. "We're trying to make it last longer by making soup, so we put a small amount of rice or wheat in." She said her family is fortunate to still have some food stored up.

"Other people are not so lucky. They couldn't store food because they didn't have enough money, so really they're hungry. They're trying to just live," she said. She said a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of rice or wheat is about \$8 and that the price could go up at any time.

She sent a photograph from the basement showing two of her grandchildren sitting on her lap. She has also posted videos on YouTube to tell the world about the suffering in Ghouta. In one of the videos, she is seen standing in an apartment near an open window, when the sound of a warplane is heard right before a shell slams down outside.

"The children are horrified when they hear the intense bombing, especially when they are close to our homes. They cry or they scream. Grown women, they cry and scream," she said.

She said that sometimes the shelling starts unexpectedly.

"We would be upstairs cooking or using the bathroom and we have to run downstairs, and we hope a bomb doesn't fall," she said.

"I am just a schoolteacher here. I am just a regular person living a daily life. My message to the United States, to

President Trump, I wish he could put pressure on the Russian government to stop sending their warplanes here and bombing us."

Lynn said Assad's forces and Russian warplanes "are purposely hitting civilian targets, they're hitting medical centers, they're hitting basements which are shelters for a lot of people." Russia, which has been waging an air campaign in support of Assad's forces since 2015, denies targeting civilians.

Lynn said the family remained in eastern Ghouta after the Arab Spring uprising began because they hoped things would change. Later, as the civil war escalated, they stayed because they feared losing their home and property. "We didn't want to leave this place that my children were raised in," she said.

She said residents of eastern Ghouta hope the U.N. Security Council will implement the cease-fire it adopted last month, and that families won't be forced to leave as part of a surrender deal, as they have in many other parts of Syria.

"This is their home and this is their property. They shouldn't be forced to leave or evacuate their homes," she said.

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Chaos In 2 Towns As Turkish And Syrian Forces Close In

By Bassem Mroue And Philip Issa
Associated Press, March 12, 2018

BEIRUT (AP) — Parallel offensives waged by Turkey and the Syrian government on two separate towns in Syria on Monday pushed residents into overcrowded shelters for safety as others tried to flee the advancing forces by road.

Residents and displaced families in the besieged town of Douma in the rebel-held Damascus suburbs of eastern Ghouta were sleeping in shops and in the streets as basements in the town filled up beyond capacity, said Haitham Bakkar, a local resident.

"We are afraid of the assault," Bakkar said of the government's efforts to take the town amid a ferocious campaign of shelling and airstrikes. Blasts could be heard as he spoke to The Associated Press via a messaging service.

Meanwhile, thousands of people were fleeing the northwestern town of Afrin as Turkish troops and Turkey-backed opposition fighters moved closer to completely encircling it.

Ebrahim Ebrahim, a Europe-based spokesman for the largest Kurdish group in Syria, the Democratic Union Party, or PYD, said those fleeing were heading toward government-controlled areas, fearful that Turkish troops and Turkey-backed Syrian opposition fighters might commit atrocities

against the Kurds and minority Christians, Alawites and Yazidis in the town.

Turkish troops have destroyed water and power stations that supply Afrin, making it difficult for people to stay there.

"Water has been cut from Afrin for a week now. Everyone is very scared of what's coming now that the Turkish occupying forces are getting closer to the town's center," said resident Serbest Hassan. He said 800,000 civilians in Afrin were now facing a humanitarian "catastrophe" amid food shortages and relentless Turkish airstrikes. There is real fear, he said, of massacres once Turkish troops and their allies reach the town.

Turkey launched the military offensive against the U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish militia known as YPG, to clear its fighters from the enclave of Afrin. Ankara considers the YPG a terror organization linked to its own Kurdish insurgency.

Near the Syrian capital, meanwhile, a small group of civilians managed to flee eastern Ghouta for government-held areas, while the area's largest armed rebel group said it had reached an agreement with Russian forces to evacuate the wounded from the besieged territory.

The local council of Douma said in a statement on Saturday that burials had been halted because of airstrikes on the town's cemetery. It said the humanitarian situation was "catastrophic."

State-run Syrian TV broadcast footage showing a group of men, women and children it says left the town of Madyara after it was captured by Syrian troops on Sunday. The TV showed several women carrying babies and welcoming the Syrian army, claiming the rebels were preventing civilians from leaving eastern Ghouta.

The civilians used a corridor established by the Syrian army amid military gains that have effectively divided eastern Ghouta into three parts.

Recapturing the enclave would mark one of the most significant victories for President Bashar Assad in the seven-year civil war. It would also be the worst setback for rebels since the opposition was ousted from the eastern half of the city of Aleppo in late 2016 following a similar siege and bombing campaign.

Eastern Ghouta is larger and more populated, with some 400,000 people believed to be living there, trapped under a relentless air and ground bombardment and a crippling years-long siege. More than 1,100 people have been killed since the large-scale government offensive began on Feb. 18.

In rapid advances over the weekend, Syrian government forces split eastern Ghouta in two — a northern and southern part — then cut off the key towns of Douma and Harasta from the rest of the enclave, further squeezing residents living there. Douma is eastern Ghouta's largest settlement.

The largest rebel group in eastern Ghouta, the Army of Islam, said it had reached an agreement with government-allied Russian forces to evacuate the wounded from the enclave. Its statement said the deal with the Russians was reached through the United Nations.

The Army of Islam said the wounded will be evacuated in stages but made no mention of whether they are rebel fighters or civilians. The group also did not say when the evacuations would begin or where the wounded would be taken.

Meanwhile, at the United Nations, the United States circulated a draft resolution on Monday urging the Security Council to order a 30-day cease-fire in the Syrian capital and eastern Ghouta, expressing "outrage" at the lack of implementation of a resolution adopted Feb. 24 calling for a cease-fire throughout Syria to deliver humanitarian aid and evacuate the wounded and critically ill.

The U.S. draft would eliminate what U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley called a "loophole" in the Feb. 24 resolution that allows military operations against al-Qaida and Islamist State extremist groups.

Haley also warned Syria that the United States was prepared to take military action for alleged chemical attacks that are killing and wounding Syrian civilians. Noting that since the resolution was passed there have been three allegations of chlorine gas attacks during a stepped up military campaign against rebels, Haley told the council: "This is no cease-fire. The cease-fire has failed."

Associated Press writer Sarah El Deeb contributed to this report.

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The Most Unnerving Visit To The Middle East In A Long Time

In Syria and Lebanon, Iran and its proxies escalate their threats to Israel, Sunni Arabs and the U.S.

By Lindsey Graham

[Wall Street Journal](#), March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

After Defeating Islamic State, Iraq's Shiites Turn Ire Toward Government

By Isabel Coles and Ali Nabhan

[Wall Street Journal](#), March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Senators Will Vote On Pulling Troops Out Of Yemen, But When

By Niels Lesniewski

[Roll Call \(DC\)](#), March 12, 2018

A resolution that would direct the withdrawal of U.S. forces from ongoing hostilities in Yemen is ripe for Senate action, but the clogged calendar means supporters might not immediately get it to the floor.

The question may be how to shoehorn the measure on to the schedule before the next recess.

The resolution uses the expedited procedures under the War Powers Resolution, meaning now that 10 calendar days have passed since introduction on Feb. 28, the resolution could be subject to a motion to discharge it from the Foreign Relations Committee.

Under the rules, 10 hours of debate would be allowed on the Senate floor.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., introduced the measure with lead support from Connecticut Democrat Christopher S. Murphy and Republican Mike Lee of Utah.

Lee's office said Monday it would be eager to get the resolution to a floor vote this week, if possible. That is because next week appears socked with debate on an omnibus spending bill to keep the discretionary accounts of the government funded for the remainder of fiscal 2018.

"This horror is caused in part by our decision to facilitate a bombing campaign that is murdering children, and to endorse a Saudi strategy inside Yemen that is deliberately using disease and starvation and the withdrawal of humanitarian support as a tactic," Murphy said in a statement at the time the senators unveiled the resolution.

There is no timeline for calling up the Yemen resolution this week in part because of the procedural hurdles on a banking regulatory rollback that have taken longer than advocates for the measure would have hoped.

A debate-limiting vote on a substitute amendment from the sponsor of that bill, Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Chairman Michael D. Crapo of Idaho, is set for 5:30 p.m.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky also filed cloture to limit debate on the underlying bill and the nomination of Kevin K. McAleenan to be commissioner of Customs and Border Protection for floor action this week.

Those three procedural votes and the accompanying 30 hours of post-cloture debate on each one might exhaust the week, assuming senators will be eager to wrap up at what has become the customary time on Thursday afternoon.

Lee, Sanders and Murphy could try to force the Senate to hold a rare Friday legislative session for the Yemen debate.

While that might get a lot of eyeballs, it might also frustrate colleagues. That means the resolution could wait

until next week, or until after the two-week recess for Passover and Easter.

U.S. Grants \$200 Million Military Sale To Qatar Despite Secret Spy Op On American Citizens

By Adam Kredo

Washington Free Beacon, March 12, 2018

The United States is planning a \$200 million military sale to Qatar, despite recent revelations the country funded a spy operation on American Jews and conducted hack attacks on U.S. citizens, according to multiple sources familiar with the effort who described the timing of this sale as "spectacularly bad."

The Trump administration has signed off on a new military deal with Qatar to provide it with \$197 million in military technology to enhance and upgrade its Air Force, according to the State Department.

The sale comes at a challenging time in U.S.-Qatar diplomatic relations, as lawmakers on Capitol Hill pursue an effort to launch a federal investigation into Al Jazeera—the Qatari-backed news outlet—following disclosures the country funded a secret, months-long spy operation on American Jews on U.S. soil.

While the deal is likely to be approved by Congress's foreign relations committees, which control such deals, many insiders are beginning to oppose the sale as a result of Qatar's ongoing financing of terror groups such as Hamas and its recent efforts to hack a prominent Republican-tied fundraiser.

Qatar has grown closer to Iran in recent months as U.S. allies in the region attempt to isolate the nation as a result of its financing for terror groups and use of Al Jazeera to disseminate propaganda across the region.

Critics of the military sale say the United States is straddling an ever blurring line as it seeks to bolster military relations with Qatar—the host of one of America's largest air bases in the region—while cracking down on its ties to Hamas and other terror groups.

"The timing is spectacularly bad for this sale," one veteran congressional adviser who works on Middle East issues told the Washington Free Beacon. "In just the last few weeks the Qataris have gotten themselves wrapped up in hacking campaigns against American citizens and infiltration operations against American Jewish organizations."

"They're still jerking the chain of our Arab allies on the Brotherhood and the Israelis on Hamas," the source said. "This sale might go through because there's so much money involved, but people are beginning to ask again why we're supporting these guys in the first place."

Qatar's U.S. lobbyists, in filings with the federal government, have been pressuring lawmakers to rollback efforts to combat financing for Hamas and other terror

groups, claiming such efforts interfere with the U.S.-Qatari relationship.

Qatar claims that congressional efforts led by Rep. Brian Mast (R., Fla.) to crackdown on international funding for terrorism "erroneously and unfairly" targets Doha, according to these filings.

It is likely that the upcoming military sale also could conflict with that legislation, further complicating efforts by the U.S. to bolster Qatar's fighting forces.

"If Qatar's Washington lobbyists are concerned about the Mast legislation with regard to the sale of F-15s, this Foreign Military Sale to Qatar would likely fall under that pending bill as well," noted one opponent of the sale who would only discuss the matter on background.

Recent reports claim that Qatar has damaging information about Trump adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner, but declined to provide the information to U.S. authorities investigating possible collusion between the Trump administration and Russia.

Qatar also has been implicated in a targeted hack campaign of U.S. Republican fundraiser Elliott Broidy, who claims the country penetrated his email account and passed the information to American news outlets.

Qatar's Al Jazeera news outlet was recently found to have conducted a months-long spy operation on U.S. Jews and individuals associated with the pro-Israel movement for a documentary the news outlet claims will expose Jewish control in American politics.

The documentary, which has yet to air, has stirred controversy in Washington, D.C., and prompted a bipartisan team of lawmakers including Sen. Ted Cruz (R., Texas) to call on the Trump administration's Department of Justice to launch a formal investigation into Al Jazeera to determine if it should register as a foreign agent under U.S. law.

As these controversies mount, the Trump administration quietly announced the \$197 million military sale, which it says will help Qatar carry out anti-terrorism operations.

"The Government of Qatar has requested to purchase equipment and support to upgrade the Qatari Emiri Air Force's (QEAF) Air Operation Center (AOC) to enhance the performance of integrated air defense planning and provide US-Qatari systems interoperability," the State Department and U.S. military announced last week.

The sale will include advanced technology including GPS systems, "anti-spoofing" equipment, encryption technology, as well as training to use this equipment. The U.S. also will provide secure communications equipment, cybersecurity services, and other equipment to boost Qatar's fleet.

"This proposed sale will contribute to the foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to improve the security of a friendly country that has been, and

continues to be, an important force for political stability and economic progress in the Persian Gulf region," the State Department said. "Our mutual defense interests anchor our relationship and the Qatar Emiri Air Force (QEAF) plays a predominant role in Qatar's defense."

The deal faces scrutiny in light of Qatar's recent actions against the United States and is raising questions on Capitol Hill among those who view the sale as rewarding Qatar at a time when Congress is calling for a federal investigation into its activities.

"As Qatar continues to fund terrorism and run a propaganda outlet, Al Jazeera, that has carried out a spy operation in Washington, D.C., now is not the time to be approving \$200 million in military equipment to Qatar," said a second foreign policy insider familiar with efforts to investigate Qatar and Al Jazeera.

"Given increasing congressional concerns about Qatar, they will give this the highest scrutiny—and so they should," the source said. "MAGA voters didn't go to the ballot boxes to support a President Tillerson, they wanted their Donald. If he doesn't want to lose their support, President Trump will need to get the Tillerson wing of his administration under control."

U.S. May Lift Travel Ban On 'Important Partner' Chad, Tillerson Says

Reuters, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Tillerson Ends Africa Trip Vowing US Backing Against Terror

By Phil Hazlewood

AFP, March 12, 2018

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson brought his truncated maiden Africa trip to a close on Monday, promising the full backing of the United States to two countries on the frontline of the war on terror.

Washington's top diplomat has been on a five-country tour of east and west Africa but was forced to cut short his visit "due to demands in (his) schedule", the State Department said.

After stops in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya, which were overshadowed by US President Donald Trump's surprise announcement on talks with North Korea, he squeezed visits to Chad and Nigeria into just one day.

Before returning to Washington, Tillerson notably promised Nigeria support ranging from equipment to intelligence to help secure the swift release of 110 schoolgirls kidnapped last month by Boko Haram jihadists.

The students were taken from their state-run school in Dapchi, in the northeastern state of Yobe, on February 19. Nothing has been heard from them since.

The abduction brought back painful memories of the kidnapping of 276 girls from Chibok in April 2014 that sparked global outrage and calls for their release, led by then-first lady Michelle Obama.

The Dapchi abduction has yet to garner such support.

Tillerson called it "heartbreaking" and added: "Nigeria has the United States' full support and we are actively working with our partners in what we can to assist you in this fight."

Washington was already "very engaged" with Nigeria and its neighbours "in supporting, equipping and training" as well as advising and providing information.

"I think that's the best way we can help the government of Nigeria secure the release these girls, which we hope will be done in a peaceful manner," he added.

"We hope something can be worked out and they (Boko Haram) can be persuaded to release these girls quickly. That's what we pray."

– Talks not force –

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari benefitted at the polls in 2015 from his predecessor's handling of the aftermath of Chibok.

But Dapchi and persistent suicide bombings and raids in the northeast have raised questions about the extent of his repeated claim the jihadists are on the verge of defeat.

The United States has agreed to sell Nigeria 12 Super Tucano A-29 ground attack aircraft in a \$593 million deal, which the country's foreign minister Geoffrey Onyeama said on Monday would be a "game-changer".

The Obama administration blocked the sale on human rights grounds.

Buhari's office said the president asked Tillerson for further support in terms of training and equipment, without elaborating.

It also said in a statement that Buhari had "chosen negotiation" to secure the return of the Dapchi schoolgirls rather than the use of military force.

"We are trying to be careful. It is better to get our daughters back alive," he was quoted as saying.

Buhari is expected to visit Yobe state this week.

– Travel ban –

Tillerson arrived in Abuja from N'Djamena, where he said Washington supported the fight by the so-called G5 Sahel countries against jihadists in the volatile Saharan region.

Chad was an "important partner" in fighting terrorism, Tillerson told a news conference.

Chad last year was stunned to find itself on one of six Muslim-majority countries whose countries are affected by President Donald Trump's travel ban.

The US military has a drone unit at the N'Djamena airport, Washington backs a multinational force fighting Boko Haram jihadists, helps train Chadian troops and provides military equipment to its armed forces, according to a Chadian military official.

Tillerson said he wanted "to ensure that the people of Chad understand they are welcome in the United States" and argued the country's inclusion on the list "has never harmed in any way whatsoever the cooperation between our two countries."

Progress had been made with dealing with what has been cited as the reason for including Chad on the list — problems with its passports, which are not biometric.

He said steps were being taken "to allow us to begin to normalise the travel relationship with Chad".

India's Hindu Right Intensifies A Religious Battle Over A Demolished Mosque

By Annie Gowen

Washington Post, March 11, 2018

AYODHYA, India — The mob of Hindu fundamentalists brought down the mosque in just a few hours, using pickaxes, rope and their bloody, bare hands. Dust swirled above the rubble, smoke from nearby torched homes soured the air, and 16 Muslims lay dead, the first of about 2,000 people who would die in riots across India in the days to come.

Twenty-five years ago, Hindus tore down the Babri mosque in this northern Indian town believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Lord Ram, shaking secular India to its foundations. In the years since, Ayodhya — its name now synonymous with strife — has become a magnet for fundamentalist Hindu leaders who want a soaring sandstone temple dedicated to Ram to be built where the mosque once stood.

They are finding new energy as India's Supreme Court prepares to begin hearing arguments this week in a decades-old title dispute over the holy site, with Hindu leaders planning a high-profile whistle-stop campaign and religious events across India. And they feel they have strong support with the party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist, in office at the state and national level.

Modi's brand of assertive, religion-based patriotism has widespread appeal — especially among India's youths — but his tenure has also coincided with a rise in tensions between majority Hindus on one side and Muslims and other minorities on the other. Instances of religious violence, including lynchings, rose 16 percent last year, according to the Ministry of Home Affairs.

"Modiji is a superman," said one bearded holy man, Sreesakthi Saanthananda. "They know it's our birthright to make a temple in the soil of the birthplace of Lord Ram."

Muslims say that the Hindu leaders are inflaming old tensions for political gain. The global guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who is trying to mediate, has called on Muslims to withdraw their claim to the contested site, warning of "contention and conflict for years to come."

Haji Mehboob, a local resident, is one of the litigants in the court case and says the site should be a mosque: "They're trying to create an environment of polarization and communal disharmony. There will be some trouble."

A protracted dispute

In a large field not far from the site of the destroyed mosque, supporters of the proposed Ram Temple gathered around a flatbed truck adorned with elaborate gold pillars, a temple on wheels that would carry supporters through several states in India to rally the faithful. At the same time, the World Hindu Council, or Vishwa Hindu Parishad, will hold special religious ceremonies in villages and towns across the country this month, also designed to give fresh momentum to their movement.

Smrita Tiwari, a district leader for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, said she and other devout Hindus feel a greater sense of freedom with a conservative government in office — in a country that is about 80 percent Hindu and 14 percent Muslim. Previous governments dominated by the progressive Congress Party cosseted Muslims with special privileges, she said.

"We used to feel that we had come from the outside and Muslims completely controlled the country," she said. "Now, with Modi in power, things are different. We can unfurl the saffron flag for the first time."

"Muslims are very fanatical," she said. "They only think about their religion. They are not good to us. We don't go to Mecca and claim a place there. Why should they be given the land where Lord Ram was born?"

For more than a century, Hindus and Muslims have argued over the Babri Masjid, built to honor the Mughal emperor Babur in 1528. The complicated case before the Supreme Court dates to shortly after a December night in 1949 when Hindu priests sneaked into the mosque and placed idols there, prompting officials to lock down the complex.

On Dec. 6, 1992, hundreds of religious volunteers — their heads wrapped in saffron-colored bandannas — climbed the dome and demolished the structure in a matter of hours, sparking days of rioting throughout South Asia.

In 2010, the high court in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodhya is located, ruled that the mosque had been built on the ruins of a Hindu temple and ordered that the site be divided into three parcels — two for Hindu groups and the third for Muslims. Hindu and Muslim litigants have since said that such a division is unacceptable.

Modi has been largely circumspect about the temple issue as the court case goes on. But the firebrand monk from

Modi's party who is now leader of Uttar Pradesh state has been more forceful, saying that authorities could "explore other options" outside the courts to build the temple "in deference to widespread feelings on the issue."

The leader, Yogi Adityanath, who is known for making divisive statements, has vowed to make Ayodhya a major tourist destination, and during India's festival of lights in October, he threw a grand party on its riverbank, with thousands of twinkling earthenware lamps and an actor dressed as Lord Ram — in an enormous gold crown — descending from the skies in a helicopter.

The politics of religion

Despite the political attention, the town of Ayodhya remains a shabby place with bumpy roads leading to countless shrines, mosques and temples. As in the rest of the state, unemployment among youths is high, and many have migrated elsewhere to look for jobs.

Much of the town's economy is driven by Hindu pilgrims coming from elsewhere in India to worship at the makeshift shrine that remains at the disputed site, an eerie place accessed by a winding, caged walkway lined with soldiers armed with machine guns.

Opposition leaders from the Congress Party have accused Modi and Adityanath's followers of trying to revive communal discord as a tactic to energize the party's political base in coming national elections. But, they argue, that may not work this time, because India has moved on, its youths born after 1992 anxious for the government to address a growing jobs crisis and provide other opportunities.

"They are only showing us dreams," said Sandip Sharma, 25, a resident of Ayodhya. "This can be the only way to get votes in the next election. They don't have any other issue to talk about — they haven't given jobs or development projects."

Sharma dreams of a government job, but he has struggled to find work despite a college degree and scrapes by giving tours and tutoring students. Why not build a hospital or some other public facility that would bring employment, he wonders, rather than a temple?

NATIONAL NEWS

In Bow To NRA, Trump Throws Gun Purchase Age To States, Courts

By Roberta Rampton, Doina Chiacu
Reuters, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Trump's Strong Words On Guns Give Way To Political Reality

By Catherine Lucey And Jonathan Lemire
Associated Press, March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) — Not two weeks ago, President Donald Trump wagged his finger at a Republican senator and scolded him for being "afraid of the NRA," declaring that he would stand up to the powerful gun lobby and finally get results on quelling gun violence following last month's Florida school shooting.

On Monday, Trump struck a very different tone as he backpedaled from his earlier demands for sweeping reforms and bowed to Washington reality. The president, who recently advocated increasing the minimum age to purchase an assault weapon to 21, tweeted that he's "watching court cases and rulings" on the issue, adding that there is "not much political support (to put it mildly)."

Over the weekend, the White House released a limited plan to combat school shootings that leaves the question of arming teachers to states and local communities and sends the age issue to a commission for review. Just two days earlier, Trump had mocked commissions as something of a dead end while talking about the opioid epidemic. "We can't just keep setting up blue-ribbon committees," he said, adding that all they do is "talk, talk, talk."

Seventeen people were killed in last month's shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, prompting a national conversation about gun laws, fierce advocacy for stronger gun control from surviving students and, initially, a move from Trump to buck his allies at the National Rifle Association.

In a televised meeting with lawmakers on Feb. 28, Trump praised members of the gun lobby as "great patriots" but declared "that doesn't mean we have to agree on everything. It doesn't make sense that I have to wait until I'm 21 to get a handgun, but I can get this weapon at 18."

He then turned toward Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pennsylvania, and questioned why previous gun control legislation did not include that provision.

"You know why?" said Trump, answering his own question. "Because you're afraid of the NRA, right? Ha ha."

His words rattled some Republicans in Congress and sparked hope among some gun control advocates that, unlike after so many previous mass shootings, meaningful regulations would be enacted. But Trump appeared to foreshadow his change of heart with a tweet the very next night.

"Good (Great) meeting in the Oval Office tonight with the NRA!" the president wrote.

White House aides said Monday the president was focusing on achievable options, after facing significant opposition from lawmakers on a more comprehensive approach. Trump will back two modest pieces of legislation, and the administration pledged to help states pay for firearms training for teachers.

Seemingly on the defensive after his about-face, Trump tweeted Monday of the age limit that "States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)."

The White House insisted that Trump remained committed to more significant changes even if they are delayed.

"We can't just write things down and make them law. We actually have to follow a process," said press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. "Right now the president's primary focus is pushing through things we know that have broad bipartisan support."

She placed blame for the inaction on Capitol Hill. But Trump has made little effort to marshal the support of congressional Republicans or use his popularity with NRA voters to provide cover for his party during a contentious vote.

Democrats and gun control advocates were quick to pounce on the president's retreat from previous demands, with Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., tweeting that Trump "couldn't even summon the political courage to propose raising the age limit on firearm purchases – despite repeated promises to support such a step at a meeting with lawmakers."

Very strong improvement and strengthening of background checks will be fully backed by White House. Legislation moving forward. Bump Stocks will soon be out. Highly trained expert teachers will be allowed to conceal carry, subject to State Law. Armed guards OK, deterrent!.....— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) March 12, 2018

Television personality Geraldo Rivera — who had urged the president to consider tougher age limits during a dinner at Trump's Florida club — tweeted that Trump had "blinked in face of ferocious opposition from #NRA."

Still, Trump argued that this was progress.

"Very strong improvement and strengthening of background checks will be fully backed by White House," he tweeted. He added that an effort to bar bump stock devices was coming and that "Highly trained expert teachers will be allowed to conceal carry, subject to State Law. Armed guards OK, deterrent!"

Without strong advocacy from the White House, an ambitious gun package was unlikely to even get off the ground, given most Republicans' opposition to any new restrictions. The two measures backed by Trump — an effort to strengthen the federal background check system and an anti-school violence grant program — both enjoy bipartisan support, though some Republicans object and many Democrats say they are insufficient.

Trump drew some Republican backing, with Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, who wrote the school safety bill, tweeting he was "grateful" for the White House backing and calling the

measure "the best first step we can take" to make students safer.

No deadline was set for recommendations from Trump's planned commission, but officials expected them within a year.

Lemire reported from New York. Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro and Jill Colvin contributed from Washington.

Follow Lucey on Twitter at http://twitter.com/@catherine_lucey and Lemire at <http://twitter.com/@JonLemire>

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Trump Accused Of Backpedaling On Gun Control

By Paul Handley

AFP, March 12, 2018

Washington (AFP) — President Donald Trump stood accused Monday of caving in to the US gun lobby one month after the Florida school shooting, as the White House pushed ahead with plans to arm teachers but backpedaled on curbing access to assault rifles.

Under pressure to act after a teenager killed 17 people with a semi-automatic rifle in Parkland, Trump had signalled support for raising from 18 to 21 the federal minimum age for purchasing the powerful weapons.

But measures unveiled by his administration Sunday made no mention of any such action — nor of enforcing the vetting of buyers for firearm sales that take place online and at gun shows, another idea floated by the White House.

Instead Education Secretary Betsy DeVos put the focus squarely on Trump's highly-controversial push to arm teachers and administrators, saying it was "committed to working quickly" on the move opposed by educator groups but backed by the powerful National Rifle Association.

On the issue of vetting gun buyers, the White House has endorsed minor legislation in Congress to improve federal and state databases used for background checks by licensed dealers.

And, more than five months after a man killed 58 people in Las Vegas using multiple AR-15 rifles equipped with so-called "bump stocks" — devices that turn semi-automatic rifles in machine guns — the Justice Department Saturday announced a proposal to ban them, a move that could take months.

Trump touted his actions Monday, saying the White House would back "very strong improvement and strengthening of background checks."

"Bump Stocks will soon be out. Highly trained expert teachers will be allowed to conceal carry, subject to State Law," he tweeted.

But regarding age limits, he said, it would be left to individual states to act.

"Not much political support (to put it mildly)," Trump said.

Critics accused Trump of wilting after three of the worst mass shootings in US history scarred his first year in office, saying the measures fall far short of what is needed.

"The White House has taken tiny baby steps designed not to upset the NRA, when the gun violence epidemic in this country demands that giant steps be taken," said Chuck Schumer, the Senate Democratic leader.

Robert Spitzer, an expert on the gun rights debate and chair of the political science department at the State University of New York, College at Cortland, foresaw no meaningful reform despite a "startling" campaign launched by student survivors in Florida.

"His initiative basically amounts to a big nothing," he said of Trump.

– Public wants tougher controls –

Polls since the shooting at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School show the US public has turned strongly for tougher regulations.

Students from the school have taken the lead in a national campaign to advance gun control, meeting Trump and other leading politicians, and helping force through a new law on age limits for purchasers in Florida.

But the NRA, a potent lobby which considers the US Constitution's Second Amendment to grant broad gun ownership rights, has pressed the White House and Congress to hold off.

On Friday it filed a lawsuit contesting Florida's new age limit law.

"It totally eviscerates the right of law-abiding adults between the ages of 18 and 21 to keep and bear arms," the NRA said.

Trump chastised a group of legislators he met at the White House at the end of last month, telling them they were afraid of the gun lobby.

But NRA leaders have met privately with Trump himself twice in recent weeks, and the president has noticeably tempered his calls for more gun controls in the wake of the Florida shooting.

Spitzer was deeply pessimistic on the chances of action on gun control in a Republican-controlled Congress that faces a tough election battle in November.

"The NRA did not want to see Congress enacting any legislation," he said. "If there are 100 mass shootings next week, the Congress is not going to move on any significant new gun law."

Why Trump's Modest Proposal On Guns Still Might Not Happen In Congress

By Lauren Fox

CNN, March 12, 2018

(CNN)President Donald Trump has finally outlined exactly what he wants to see from Congress on guns, and it's not much.

After weeks of talk, Trump has settled on a modest set of proposals that fall far short of the wide-ranging changes – such as raising the minimum purchasing age on some guns or expanding background checks to gun shows and internet sales – he promoted during a televised White House meeting at the end of February. On an issue such as guns, where both sides are entrenched, it was the President who offered the best opportunity to scramble party lines and change the conversation. Instead, Trump is promoting plans that reflect traditional Republican orthodoxy, make narrow changes to background checks and focus more on school security.

The administration announced Sunday night that it would launch a commission to study school violence and would look at ways to allow states to train teachers who wanted to carry guns. The administration also announced support for legislation sponsored by Republican Majority Whip John Cornyn of Texas and Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut that would offer financial incentives to state and federal agencies to enter more data into the National Instant Criminal Background Check System – a proposal known as "Fix NICs" – but stops far short of the expanded background check bill that Trump promoted at the end of February.

Know who's 'afraid of the NRA'? Donald Trump.

There is little time for lawmakers to even take up the gun issue, however. The best chance for any of Trump's proposals to get pushed through is for some of them to be added to the must-pass spending bill that must be finished before the end of March. The House votes this week on a plan to give states more money for school security, and the Senate has its own plan that could potentially be included, but any addition would have to have the signoff of House and Senate Republicans and Democrats. Having a wide-ranging gun debate on the Senate floor doesn't appear in the cards right now. The Senate floor is full with the body still working through a banking deregulation bill this week and then moving on to legislation to target sex trafficking.

Many Senate Democrats have also been clear that they aren't interested in moving on Fix NICs – the legislation Trump is promoting – without an opportunity to get votes on more far-reaching gun proposals. While Democrats support Fix NICs, they view it as only a starting point.

".@WhiteHouse has taken tiny baby steps designed not to upset @NRA when the #gunviolence epidemic demands giant steps be taken. @SenateDems will push to go further:

passing universal #backgroundchecks, actual fed legislation on protection orders & a debate on #AssaultWeaponsBan," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York tweeted Sunday.

Murphy, a co-sponsor of Fix NICs, has said he has worked for weeks with Cornyn to try to find a time agreement, but that one has proved elusive.

"The problem seems to be that McConnell's not willing right now to commit," Murphy told CNN last week.

The White House's announcement follows a familiar pattern for Trump. While publicly he might embrace plans that challenge his party's principles on issues like guns or immigration, the President has a tendency over time and with the help of GOP leaders and aides to realign himself with core Republican principles. It happened with immigration and then again with guns.

One of the key areas on guns where Trump seems to have retreated is on a proposal to raise the minimum age at which individuals can buy rifles from 18 to 21. In the wake of a shooting last month at a high school in Parkland, Florida, he was insistent that he wanted to see the age change. Even when aides suggested Trump was evolving, the President himself said he wanted to raise the age limit.

But the proposal wasn't part of the plan Sunday, forcing Trump to explain himself on Twitter Monday morning: "On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)."

A CNN poll released late last month found 71% of Americans polled supported preventing people under age 21 from buying any type of gun.

Trump Confirms He's Backing Off Raising Age For Purchasing Some Guns

By Louis Nelson

Politico, March 12, 2018

President Donald Trump confirmed Monday morning that his administration would back away from a proposal to raise the minimum age at which Americans are allowed to buy certain firearms, conceding that there is "not much political support" for such a step.

Trump had previously proposed raising to 21 the legal age for purchasing certain types of guns, including assault-style rifles like the one used in last month's mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The president's proposal was met with pushback from the NRA and was left off of a list of recommendations to stop school shootings released on Sunday by the White House.

"On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)," Trump wrote on Twitter.

Before conceding on raising the age limit for the purchase of certain guns, Trump had publicly chided members of his own party, telling GOP lawmakers at a White House meeting that they were "afraid of the NRA."

In an earlier tweet, the president touted other steps that his administration still intends to pursue, including "very strong improvement and strengthening of background checks" and the banning of bump stocks, a device used last year by a mass shooter in Las Vegas that allows a semi-automatic weapon to function essentially as an automatic one. "Highly trained expert teachers will be allowed to conceal carry, subject to state law," the president said, a step he has argued will harden schools against shooters and deter attacks.

Later Monday morning, the president tweeted that gun free zones are an "invitation" for "violence and danger."

While Trump has backed away from his support for raising the age at which certain guns can be purchased to 21, Florida Gov. Rick Scott signed legislation earlier this month doing just that, as well as banning bump stocks, funding mental health programs in schools and instituting a three-day waiting period for the purchase of firearms. The bill, which has prompted the NRA to sue the state of Florida in order to block its implementation, also allows willing teachers to carry a firearm inside schools.

Trump Change On Minimum Age For Buying A Gun Is The Latest Example Of His Policy Zigzags

By Ledyard King

USA Today, March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump's decision to hold off on proposing an increase in the minimum age to buy any gun from 18 to 21 — after initially voicing his strong support — shouldn't come as a shock from someone prone to public zigzagging.

After all, Trump signaled support to key senators last fall for a bill to prop up the Affordable Care Act until he backtracked the next day.

And he told other senators in January he was ready to back a bipartisan immigration bill until he reversed course within hours.

Then last week, he endorsed a face-to-face summit with Kim Jong Un after Trump had tweeted in October that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was "wasting his time" trying to negotiate with the North Korea dictator.

In a meeting with lawmakers two weeks ago, Trump said "it doesn't make sense that I have to wait until I'm 21 to get a handgun, but I can get this weapon at 18," referring to the AR-15 style assault weapon that alleged shooter Nikolas Cruz used to kill 17 and wound 15 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., on Valentine's Day.

But when the White House unveiled its school safety plan Sunday night in reaction to the Parkland massacre, the only mention of the age proposal was that it would be one of 11 issues a commission headed by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos would study.

Trump tweeted that he's "watching court cases and rulings" before proposing a universal age increase, but noted there's "not much political support (to put it mildly)."

Press Secretary Sarah Sanders on Monday said the president had not abandoned the idea of raising the gun-buying age but that the plan released Sunday reflects what the executive branch can achieve now.

"The president as you know doesn't have the ability to just create federal law," Sanders said. "So what he is pushing forward are things that can be immediately accomplished either through the administration or that have broad-based bipartisan support in Congress. But that doesn't mean that he has wiped away some of those other things. We're still looking at how best we can move forward."

Gun control advocates said the reason for Trump's retreat is obvious: he caved to the National Rifle Association.

"To no one's surprise, the president's words of support for stronger gun safety laws proved to be hollow," Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who backs a ban on assault weapons, said Monday "Responding to the murder of 17 students and educators by endorsing the gun lobby's platform is a shameful abdication of the president's responsibility to lead."

At the same Feb. 28 meeting with lawmakers where he discussed raising the gun-buying age, Trump also alarmed gun rights activists by suggesting he would confiscate guns from people who posed threats first and then "go through due process."

But the plan he unveiled Sunday makes no mention of such confiscation. Instead, it directs the Justice Department "to provide technical assistance" to states interested in implementing extreme risk protection orders where courts would have to approve the removal of guns from someone the state considers a safety risk.

At a campaign rally in Pennsylvania Saturday, Trump even seemed to mock the idea of a commission to solve problems government should tackle head-on.

"We can't just keep setting up blue-ribbon committees with your wife and your wife and your husband, and they meet and they have a meal and they talk, talk talk talk, two hours later, then they write a report," he said referring to the use of blue-ribbon commissions in dealing with drug dealers.

But one White House official on Sunday defended the idea of a commission on school safety, saying Trump "is committed to finding every way possible and encouraging states and communities to find and adopt every way possible to protect the students in their care."

While some conservatives might ultimately be satisfied that the president's school safety proposal keeps within traditional GOP orthodoxy on guns, Trump's initial comments troubled conservative commentator Alexandra DeSanctis.

"His remarks at this meeting were intensely revealing precisely because they showed once again that Trump is almost wholly devoid of core beliefs," she wrote in the *National Review*. "In fact, this incident is one of the starkest examples we've seen of this fact so far during his presidency. What Trump says and does is nearly always some synthesis of whatever he thinks will enable him to achieve the end he wants at any given time. And that end seems rarely to be dictated by firm principles or even a consistent policy agenda."

He was accused of similar course reversal in January when he summoned Sens. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., and Dick Durbin, D-Ill., to the White House to discuss what they thought was his support of their compromise bill to protect hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children only to have him oppose the deal when they arrived, they said.

That followed similar promises to protect those DREAMers that Democratic Senate leader Chuck Schumer of New York and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Trump made them during a White House dinner in September.

More examples of Trump's reversals include:

- Syria. Trump cited the photos of dead and maimed babies after an April 4, 2017, chemical weapons attack in Syria as among the reasons he authorized the missile strike — an option he had criticized President Barack Obama for considering (and rejecting) back in 2013.

- Chinese currency. After vowing during the campaign to declare China a currency manipulator on "Day One" of his presidency, Trump told *The Wall Street Journal* last year he no longer believes China is manipulating its currency. The *Journal* reported Trump believes that "taking the step now could jeopardize his talks with Beijing on confronting the threat of North Korea."

- The Export-Import Bank. Trump once denounced the institution that finances and insures foreign purchases of U.S. goods, calling it "featherbedding" for politicians. He told *The Wall Street Journal* that the bank "actually makes money," and basically endorsed the idea it helps U.S. companies that have to compete with foreign rivals that receive subsidies from their governments — arguments that supporters of the Export-Import Bank of the United States have been making for years.

- NATO. After repeatedly campaigning on the notion that NATO was "obsolete" and unsuited for modern times, he backtracked during a joint news conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, saying the U.S.-European military is "no longer obsolete." The president

noted he had complained that NATO didn't fight terrorism, and "they made a change," although counter-terrorism has been part of its portfolio since 9/11.

Michael A. Cohen, a Trump critic who has accused the president of having "no core principles," said he's not surprised by the constant shifts.

"Quite simply, there is no rock bottom for Trump to hit in which he realizes the error of his ways and shifts course," Cohen, the author of *American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and the Politics of Division* wrote in a recent column for *The Boston Globe*. "Rather, the Trump presidency is like one of those free-falling amusement park rides, but this one never ends."

Trump Gets Weak On Guns. Sad.

Baltimore Sun, March 12, 2018

Two weeks ago, President Donald Trump seemed to embrace comprehensive gun control in the wake of the Florida high school shooting. How do we know this? Because he used those actual words, "comprehensive gun control," in a meeting with Republicans and Democrats. He even mocked those who are "afraid" of the National Rifle Association and fiercely spoke of "taking" firearms first and then "going to court." Yet, strangely, GOP leaders in Congress and NRA officials didn't make much of a fuss. Instead, the NRA had a private meeting in the Oval Office and emerged content.

Now, the country finally knows why.

On Sunday, the White House released specifics of what Mr. Trump wants to do about guns, and Sen. Chuck Schumer's description of the proposal as "tiny baby steps designed not to upset the NRA" is, if anything, a generous assessment. At the heart of the plan (aside from endorsing pending legislation that marginally improves the National Instant Criminal Background Check with incentives for reporting such crimes as domestic violence) is a commission. That's right a commission. After all that fuss, Mr. Trump is willing to have a bunch of people sit around a table and talk about school safety.

And if anyone needed some indicator of how unlikely it is that this commission with its open-ended agenda and unclear deadlines will accomplish something meaningful, they need look no further than the person whom Mr. Trump has entrusted to lead it — Education Secretary Betsy DeVos whose first year on the cabinet has been marked mostly by revelations of how little she knows about education. The most recent was an appearance broadcast Sunday on the CBS news program "60 Minutes" during which she admitted she does not "intentionally" visit underperforming schools and was unaware if public schools in her home state of Michigan had been getting better.

Noticeably missing from the proposal was the one area where Mr. Trump had earlier seemed to completely part

company with the NRA — his plan to raise the age at which young people could purchase assault weapons from 18 to 21. Ms. DeVos said it might come up during commission meetings as "everything is on the table." That's a far cry from President Trump's February 22 tweet: "I will be strongly pushing Comprehensive Background Checks with an emphasis on Mental Health. Raise age to 21 and end sale of Bump Stocks! Congress is in a mood to finally do something on this issue — I hope."

Turns out Congress wasn't the changeable branch of government — despite the horrors of Parkland, Republican members of Congress haven't been doing much (aside from wringing their hands over the state of mental health care or wagging their fingers at the FBI and local law enforcement for not somehow preventing the mass shooting). It's the president whose mood is changeable. When it's popular to be outraged by guns, he's there, and when it's time to obey your NRA masters, he's right there, too. Clearly, the shelf life on presidential empathy over 17 deaths is slightly under a month.

What's particularly disappointing about Mr. Trump's retreat is that he was so uniquely positioned to do something serious about guns and school safety. The president has broad support among the gun-owning public. Had he stood up and decided that enough is enough and that some meaningful limits needed to be imposed, he likely could have convinced enough members of his own party to win congressional approval. After all, polls show it's a popular point of view. Now, it's clear that even the most foolish part of his proposal — arming teachers — isn't really all that meaningful. Mostly, he's calling on states to take action with some money tossed their way to help train school personnel.

Is anyone surprised by President Trump's turnabout? Probably not. Like DACA, it's part of his shtick to leap on popular issues, draw praise and then back off and retreat to his base. He now leaves the heavy lifting to GOP governors like Florida's Rick Scott who made good on his promises and signed legislation raising the minimum age to purchase firearms to 21. Of course, the NRA immediately filed suit in federal court, calling that an affront to the Second Amendment. Gun sales advocates recognize a genuine crack in the armor when they see it. The president's gun control advocacy was fake news all along.

Know Who's Afraid Of The NRA? Donald Trump.

By Chris Cillizza

CNN, March 12, 2018

Washington (CNN) Less than two weeks ago, President Donald Trump was mocking Republican Sen. Pat Toomey for being "afraid of the NRA" due to the fact that his bipartisan

gun control proposal didn't include a provision to raise the the age to certain types of guns from 18 to 21.

On Sunday night, Trump unveiled his proposal on guns in the wake of the Parkland, Florida, shooting that left 17 people dead. Guess what was left out of that proposal? Yup – nothing on raising the age limit on the purchase of some types of weapons.

Tweeted Trump of the proposal:

"Very strong improvement and strengthening of background checks will be fully backed by White House. Legislation moving forward. Bump Stocks will soon be out. Highly trained expert teachers will be allowed to conceal carry, subject to State Law. Armed guards OK, deterrent! On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)."

So, the reason he didn't push to include raising the age to buy certain kinds of weapons was because he is "watching court cases and rulings before acting"? Or is it, as Trump goes on to note, that there is "not much political support" for raising the age?

On the first reason: There are suits being filed against Dick's and Walmart – which both raised the age to buy rifles to 21 in the wake of the Parkland murders. And the NRA has sued Florida to block the part of its new law that raises the gun-buying age to 21. The NRA says that violates the 2nd and 14th Amendments.

But those suits are not necessarily a deterrent for the White House throwing its weight behind a proposal to raise the gun-buying age if it so chose. It's a bit of a smokescreen to say that pending legislation ties Trump's hands in any way. If Trump wanted to push on raising the age to buy guns, he could. The litigation is, at best, a secondary concern.

Which brings me to Trump's second point: That raising the age limit lacks public support. This is not, um, true.

In a CNN/SSRS poll conducted late last month, 71% said they supported raising the age limit to 21 to buy any sort of gun – a proposal that goes beyond even what Trump was advocating for in the open meeting he held with members of Congress on guns earlier this month. That support is strongest among Democrats (86%) but more than six in 10 independents (67%) and Republicans (61%) also favor prohibiting gun sales to anyone under 21.

When Trump says that raising the age limit to buy a gun lacks political support, what he is really saying is that it lacks the NRA's support – and those within his base who view any sort of infringement on 2nd Amendment rights as beginning down a slippery slope to gun seizure.

As soon as Trump floated raising the gun-buying age, the NRA quickly came out in opposition.

"Legislative proposals that prevent law-abiding adults aged 18-20 years old from acquiring rifles and shotguns effectively prohibits them for purchasing any firearm, thus

depriving them of their constitutional right to self-protection," said NRA Public Affairs Director Jennifer Baker.

Then, in late February, Trump had lunch at the White House with several top NRA officials who made a direct pitch to him to leave raising the age limit out of any broader gun control measure in response to Parkland.

And now, this. A proposal that focuses heavily on "hardening" schools and arming teachers. And totally leaves out raising the age limit to buy certain firearms.

That omission is not because of pending lawsuits regarding raising the age limit. And it's definitely not because public support – including among Republicans! – isn't there for such a proposal.

It's because the NRA didn't want it in there. And Trump is always putting his base – of which the NRA and single-issue 2nd Amendment voters are a big part – first.

"I'm a fan of the NRA," Trump said 11 days ago. "I mean, there's no bigger fan. I'm a big fan of the NRA."

He just proved it.

Who's Afraid Of The NRA? Trump.

By Editorial Board

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

"WE'RE GOING to get things done." So said President Trump last month assuring students, teachers and parents affected by school shootings of his resolve to find solutions to gun violence.

"You're afraid of the NRA." That was Mr. Trump the following week, chastising members of his own party for not backing age restrictions on gun purchases as he challenged lawmakers to pass "comprehensive" gun control and stand up to the gun lobby.

Now here's Mr. Trump when it comes to backing up his statements:

"..."

Yes, once again Mr. Trump's brave words prove to be meaningless as the White House unveils exactly what Mr. Trump wants to do about guns.

"Tiny baby steps designed not to upset the NRA," said Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.). That sums up the administration's proposal unveiled Sunday in response to the Feb. 14 school shooting that killed 17 people in Parkland, Fla. The plan, if you can call it that, is centered on a promise (no money or details) to help provide firearms training to school employees, a controversial idea long favored by the National Rifle Association but opposed by most teachers and school officials. Mr. Trump also endorsed some modest improvements in background checks that are the subject of bipartisan legislation now before Congress. Otherwise, nothing: not the universal background checks that are needed, no ban on weapons of war, not even an increase in the legal age to buy certain weapons, something Mr.

Trump had said made sense but seems to have abandoned in the face of NRA opposition.

"Not much political support (to put it mildly)," he tweeted Monday. Never mind that recent polls show public support for raising the age to 21. Or that big-name retailers (Walmart and Dick's Sporting Goods) have been applauded for voluntarily making the change. Or that even the gun-friendly state of Florida just raised its age limit. Or that a true leader might do the right thing and try to generate political support.

Mr. Trump's establishment instead of a federal commission to study school safety would be laughable if it were not so insulting to the student survivors and victims' families of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School who have so eloquently laid out the urgency of action. Not only has Mr. Trump made clear his disdain for such commissions as a way to avoid fixing problems, but also his appointment of struggling Education Secretary Betsy DeVos as its head doesn't inspire confidence in the outcome.

More importantly, Mr. Trump seems not to understand that gun violence is not limited to schools, nor that mass shootings are but one part of a problem that also includes too many lives lost to domestic killings, suicides and unintentional shootings. Three women were gunned down Friday night at a California veterans home by a gunman who then turned the gun on himself. A 9-year-old girl in Milwaukee died Saturday after she was accidentally shot by her brother. And on Sunday there was a reminder of the horror of the country's deadliest shooting — not in a school but at an outdoor musical festival — with The Post's account of a woman's struggle to recover from the terrible wounds she received from a gunman using a military gun with military bullets. Such weapons, of course, go unmentioned in Mr. Trump's plan.

As we've said before, if Congress waits for leadership from this White House, it will wait forever.

White House Defends Its Walkback On Gun Law Proposals

By Jeremy Diamond And Allie Malloy

CNN, March 12, 2018

Washington (CNN)The White House on Monday defended its piecemeal approach to combating gun violence and insisted President Donald Trump hasn't entirely abandoned the idea of raising the minimum age for purchasing guns, hours after the President said there was "not much political support" for the initiative.

"Right now, the President's primary focus is on pushing through things that we know have broad bipartisan support," White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said. "But we haven't let go of some of those other things that we're going to continue to review and look at."

NRA sues Florida to block part of new gun law

Sanders said "the door isn't closed" on a White House push for raising the age of gun purchases to 21 at the federal level, even as the White House kicked consideration of the issue to a commission to be led by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. The White House's proposal on Monday focused largely on measures backed by the National Rifle Association, such as arming teachers and a bill to modestly improve background check reporting.

Hours earlier, Trump defend his administration's newly unveiled gun and school safety proposals, specifically his walkback of support for raising the age limit for some firearm purchases.

"On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)," Trump tweeted.

....On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly).— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) March 12, 2018

The White House's proposal represented a shift from a President who just 10 days earlier floated his support for the change and other more significant gun law reforms, promising he would be willing to risk political capital to push legislation forward.

"I think we'll have a great bill put forward, very soon, having to do with strong background checks ... and perhaps we'll do something on age because it doesn't seem to make sense that you have to wait until you are 21 years old to get a pistol, but to get a gun like this maniac used in the school, you get that at 18," he told Fox News in an interview that aired February 24. "That doesn't make sense."

White House proposes arming teachers, backpedals on raising age to buy guns

Sanders insisted Monday that Trump "still supports raising the age limit to the age of 21 for the purchase of certain firearms" and said the administration had simply decided to begin by focusing on legislation that could win support in the Republican-held Congress. But that's a far cry from Trump's promises to lead the way on passing significant federal legislation.

"He hasn't backed away from any of these things at all," Sanders said. "But he can't make them happen with a broad stroke of the pen. You have to have a congressional component to do some of these things."

There were no signs Monday of Trump's plans to support broader legislation, which he signaled his support for just weeks earlier.

Sanders declined to say whether Trump supported the Manchin-Toomey bill that would close background check loopholes involving online and private sales, saying only the

White House will "consider other options beyond" the proposals it is already backing.

The National Rifle Association on Friday sued the state of Florida after Republican Gov. Rick Scott signed Senate Bill 7026 into law, the first gun control legislation enacted in the state after the Parkland school massacre on February 14.

The NRA has not yet commented on the White House proposals.

Trump also touted tenets of his policy including strengthening background checks and providing some school personnel with "rigorous" firearms training.

Very strong improvement and strengthening of background checks will be fully backed by White House. Legislation moving forward. Bump Stocks will soon be out. Highly trained expert teachers will be allowed to conceal carry, subject to State Law. Armed guards OK, deterrent!.....— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) March 12, 2018

"Very strong improvement and strengthening of background checks will be fully backed by White House. Legislation moving forward. Bump Stocks will soon be out. Highly trained expert teachers will be allowed to conceal carry, subject to State Law. Armed guards OK, deterrent!"

White House Insists Trump Not 'Chickening Out' On NRA

By Jonathan Easley

The Hill, March 12, 2018

The White House on Monday defended President Trump's gun proposals as it faced questions about whether he had "chickened out" in the face of pressure from the National Rifle Association (NRA).

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Trump "hasn't backed away" from his support for expanding background checks or raising the age limit on gun purchases, although neither was addressed in a plan the administration rolled out Sunday night.

The NRA, which contributed heavily to Trump's election campaign in 2016, opposes both measures.

"He hasn't backed away from these things at all," Sanders said at a press briefing, where she faced numerous questions on the issue, including from a Washington Post reporter who said the president seemed "petrified" by opposition from the NRA and wondered whether he had "chickened out."

"They're still outlined in the plan," Sanders said.

Sanders made the case that Trump is focusing first on proposals that have "broad bipartisan support" or that could be accomplished "immediately" through the regulatory process or federal action.

She insisted that the president still supports raising age limits on gun purchases and expanding background checks,

but said both would require more political pressure and further review before action can be taken.

"He can't make them happen with a broad stroke of the pen," Sanders said. "You have to have some congressional component to do some of these things, and without that support, it's not as possible."

The White House is under growing pressure to act on the president's proposed gun restrictions after last month's shooting at a Florida high school that left 17 people dead.

Weeks ago at a White House meeting with lawmakers from both parties, Trump accused Republicans of fearing the NRA and of backing down against it. He also repeatedly said he was different from other presidents and that he would take action in response to gun violence.

But the proposals advanced in a White House plan rolled out Sunday included little that would bother the NRA — a point that reporters sought to drive home in several contentious exchanges with Sanders on Monday.

"It seemed like President Trump was the one petrified of the NRA," the Post reporter said.

An exasperated Sanders said the White House was focused on what it could accomplish in the near-term, while also noting that former President Obama was not able to do anything on gun control.

"Let's not forget that the Obama administration had the White House and all of Congress for two years and didn't do anything," she said.

Trump said on Twitter on Monday he still supports raising the minimum age for purchasing a gun but there isn't enough "political support" on that front right now.

Sanders said the administration is reviewing whether age restrictions can be done at the federal level or if they need to be enacted on a state-by-state basis.

"The president, as you know, doesn't have the ability to just create federal law, and he would need a number of other individuals to come together to help make that happen," Sanders said.

The president on Monday also reiterated his support for strengthening background checks, although Sanders declined to elaborate on whether the president supports universal background checks, which would require federal involvement in private gun sale transactions and at gun shows.

The White House is backing a bill in Congress that would incentivize the use of the current criminal background checks system without expanding it. The NRA opposes expanding background checks.

In the near term, the White House says it will focus on training and arming some school officials — a highly controversial idea.

The Department of Justice will launch a voluntary program aimed at matching schools with state and local law

enforcement officials to provide "rigorous firearm training to qualified personnel."

The administration is looking to support the transition of law enforcement officials into education careers and is calling on states to enforce new measures that would allow them to take firearms away from people they deem potential threats.

And the Justice Department is reviewing whether it can use the regulatory process to ban bump stocks, a device that allows certain semi-automatic weapons to fire more rapidly. The NRA opposes banning the sale of bump stocks.

"What he is pushing forward are things that can immediately be accomplished, either through the administration or that have broad base bipartisan support in Congress," Sanders said. "But that doesn't mean that he has wiped away some of those other things that we're still looking at how best we can move forward on."

The White House has tapped Education Secretary Betsy DeVos to lead a federal commission to determine how best to address gun violence in schools.

That effort got off to a rocky start after DeVos struggled through a "60 Minutes" interview on Sunday, in which she had a hard time answering basic questions about the education system and appeared conflicted on Trump's proposal to arm some teachers.

"That should be an option for states and communities to consider," DeVos said. "And I hesitate to think of, like, my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Zorhoff, I couldn't ever imagine her having a gun and being trained in that way."

"But for those who are — who are capable this is one solution that can and should be considered," she said. "But no one size fits all."

Trump has in the past criticized so-called blue ribbon commissions, like the one DeVos is leading on school safety, saying they are used by bureaucrats to kick the can down the road.

The White House said Monday that Trump, not DeVos, would be the face of the administration's push on new gun proposals.

"I think the president is going to be the lead on school safety when it comes to this administration," Sanders said. "He certainly has been since the process has begun, and he'll continue to lead on it as we move forward."

The Trouble With The White House's Spin On Trump And Guns, In One Exchange

By Callum Borchers

[Washington Post](#), March 12, 2018

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders did her best on Monday to argue that President Trump is not backing down but rather prioritizing on gun control.

A newly released administration plan calls for improving reporting to the existing background-check system for gun

buyers and training some educators to carry firearms in schools, but it does not propose raising the minimum purchasing age for military-style rifles from 18 to 21, an idea Trump previously endorsed. Instead, the plan directs a commission led by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos to "study and make recommendations" on "age restrictions for certain firearm purchases."

"Look, the president still has in this plan the age limit increase," Sanders told reporters during a media briefing, "and that is part of one of the things that will be — one of those things [that] will be reviewed on what the best path forward is on that front, whether it can be done at a federal level or whether it needs to be done on a state-by-state basis."

"But the president, as you know, doesn't have the ability to just create federal law, and he would need a number of other individuals to come together to help make that happen. So what he is pushing forward are things that can immediately be accomplished, either through the administration or that have broad-based bipartisan support in Congress. But that doesn't mean he has wiped away some of those other things that we're still looking at how we can best move forward on."

As The Fix's Amber Phillips wrote before Monday's briefing, Trump's softening on gun control was entirely predictable. In a shameless act of patting myself on the back, I will point out that I wrote two weeks ago that Trump's backtrack on the age requirement, in particular, had already begun.

It has been apparent for a while that the White House is laying a foundation for the day when it will say Trump supported a higher age restriction "in concept" (Sanders's phrase) but could not make age 21 a reality, for one reason or another.

On Monday, Sanders insisted Trump "hasn't backed away ... at all" and repeatedly said the president is merely "pushing through things that we know have broad bipartisan support or things that we can do from an administrative perspective that we can do immediately."

The trouble with Sanders's spin was illustrated vividly in this exchange with the Wall Street Journal's Michael Bender:

BENDER: On the age restrictions, the president has said a couple of times — he's criticized his predecessors, saying they haven't shown leadership on this issue. So I wondered now how you can make the political expediency argument for his school safety policy, and that he's specifically backing only things he thinks can pass and not things that may need some additional leadership.

SANDERS: That's actually not what I said. We're specifically driving forward on some of those things that we know can immediately happen, and we're determining the best path forward on some of those other things that don't have that same broad base of support.

"Specifically backing only things he thinks can pass" sounds an awful lot like "specifically driving forward on some of those things that we know can immediately happen." Yet Sanders quibbled with Bender's paraphrase. Only by coating Trump's plan in positive language like "driving forward" and "immediately happen" can his spokeswoman sell it as anything but an indication of the president's unwillingness to fight for a policy that the National Rifle Association strongly opposes.

"Well, there's Sarah Sanders at the press briefing talking about gun control and the president's position, and that's not true — it's just not factually accurate," Fox News anchor Shepard Smith told viewers at the conclusion of the question-and-answer session. "There is broad-based support for raising the gun age limit. ... The president said to the kids at Parkland, 'I'll go strong on this. I'll work on this age thing.' He came up to the general public and said to the Congress, 'Oh, the NRA has a lot of pressure on you, has a lot of effect on you, but not on me so much.' And then he met with the NRA."

Smith is an exception on Fox News. Still, to see the White House's spin so forcefully rejected on the president's favorite network is to appreciate just how weak it is.

Florida Gun Restrictions Should Be The Model For Kansas And Missouri

Kansas City (MO) Star, March 12, 2018

President Donald Trump on Monday offered a disappointing plan aimed at reducing gun violence in the nation's schools.

It isn't enough. The states, including Missouri and Kansas, must step in to reduce the threat to all Americans.

There were some good ideas in the president's plan. Trump supports improved background checks for some gun purchases, for example, and more robust mental health counseling. He supports making it easier for state and local authorities to take guns from those deemed a danger to others.

The president has promised to ban rapid-fire "bump stocks" by administrative rule. We support that initiative.

But the Trump plan falls far short of additional steps needed to curb gun violence.

With White House support, Congress is considering bills to provide additional funds to "harden" schools through training and perhaps some building upgrades. Sadly, the amounts under discussion, from \$50 million to \$100 million a year, are far less than what's needed.

There are other serious flaws. A commission on school violence — led by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who has been a major disappointment — will likely accomplish nothing of consequence. And deadly gun massacres are

hardly limited to schools, as the people in Las Vegas, Orlando, Charleston and other communities know.

Trump's reliance on armed educators is ridiculous and counter-productive. We're also frustrated — yet hardly surprised — that the president has broken his promise to seek an increase in the minimum age to purchase some weapons.

Clearly, Trump is afraid of the National Rifle Association.

But depending on Washington to address gun violence is becoming a fool's errand anyway. Congress and the White House increasingly seem incapable of deciding any issue more complicated than naming a post office or two.

That means it's up to the states to take meaningful steps on gun issues. And legislators in Missouri and Kansas should study what just happened in Florida to understand the path forward.

The Florida Legislature is hardly a bastion of anti-gun zealots. Yet its members, prodded by the voices of students whose friends were slaughtered just a few weeks earlier, passed a comprehensive measure aimed at reducing gun violence. The governor signed it.

The new law raises the gun-buying age to 21. Bump stocks are banned. There's a short waiting period to buy a gun. The state will pay for additional school security and allow some school "marshals" to carry weapons. Mental health services are improved.

Naturally, the NRA has sued to block the age limit in the new law. It will lose. States already set different ages for gun purchases and possession, and they clearly have the right to do so.

Trump admitted as much Monday. "On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision," he tweeted.

The Florida law doesn't go as far as we'd like. But it shows how lawmakers can assemble a reasonable, comprehensive approach to reducing gun violence. The law won't stop every such shooting — no measure can — but it's a start.

Florida has recent, grim experience with indiscriminate mass murder. Missouri and Kansas must not wait until that happens here.

White House School Safety Plan Gets Cool Response In Connecticut

By Russell Blair

Hartford (CT) Courant, March 12, 2018

A new White House school safety proposal drew a cool reception in Connecticut Monday, with many leaders saying they could not support the plan because it endorses funding to help arm teachers.

"It's almost a poison pill that seems designed to sabotage the whole package," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal.

The plan, crafted in response to last month's mass shooting at a Florida high school and released late Sunday, also backs legislation to fix gaps in the background check system for gun sales and encourages more states to adopt laws like Connecticut has that allow police to temporarily take firearms away from dangerous individuals.

It does not include two items that President Donald Trump had suggested earlier he might support – universal background checks and raising the age to purchase firearms from 18 to 21.

"Just days after he looked the American people in the eye and promised real action to prevent gun violence, President Trump is proposing a plan that will appease his allies in the NRA but do very little to keep our children safe," said Gov. Dannel P. Malloy.

Rep. Elizabeth Esty, who took part in a bipartisan meeting on school safety at the White House last month, said Trump had reneged on the promises he made at that meeting.

"Make no mistake, the president was very pointed about saying how he was willing to take on the NRA and he really cared to make something happen ... we're not seeing that," she said.

Esty said any step toward arming teachers is a "non-starter."

Jan Hochadel, president of the Connecticut chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, said keeping kids safe in school requires more resources, and those resources should not be spent on firearms training.

"If we're going to put the resources in guns, that's wrong," she said. "We need to be able to have the professional development, the social workers, the nurses. All of that is an important part" to keeping kids safe in school.

Rep. John Larson also panned the idea of allowing teachers to carry guns in their classrooms, which Trump had first signaled support for three weeks ago. "I think that is an idea whose time has not arrived and hopefully never does," he said.

But Larson was optimistic about some pieces of the proposal and believed it could be amended or modified into something that would win bipartisan support.

"With all the warts and blemishes that come with this administration you have to be able to sort through the things that could be of a positive nature and act on them," he said.

Sandy Hook Promise, a gun violence prevention group co-founded by two parents who lost children in the school massacre, took a measured approach. The White House plan offered support for the STOP School Violence Act, which Sandy Hook Promise has been pushing and would give states money for training and tools to help schools identify and prevent violent acts.

"The president's plan shows that there is room for common ground and we must work together to pass solutions – big and small," the group said in a written statement. "We do not agree on everything. We absolutely do not need more guns in schools or to fortress our schools like prisons. And we can and must take additional, robust action to ensure that individuals who are a danger to themselves or others do not have access to firearms."

Sen. Chris Murphy is an author of "Fix NICS," the legislation to close gaps in the gun background check system that the White House offered support for, but like others he criticized the administration's move toward arming teachers.

"If more guns = less gun deaths, America would have the lowest gun violence rate in the world," he wrote in a tweet early Monday. "Guess what? That not how it works."

Blumenthal believes legislation that was not included in the White House plan — like his bill with Sen. Lindsay Graham, R-N.C., to empower federal law enforcement to be able to temporarily seize guns — may ultimately still be considered by lawmakers.

"I'm going to redouble my determination to fight for a federal red flag statute ... and other common sense measures that have bipartisan support," he said. "That bipartisan support can make a difference even if the President of the United States abdicates leadership."

Trump: Arming 'Expert Teachers' Will Deter School Shootings

By Dave Boyer

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

President Trump said Monday his plan to arm more teachers will help to prevent school shootings, a day after the administration unveiled his official proposals to combat school violence.

"Highly trained expert teachers will be allowed to conceal carry, subject to State Law. Armed guards OK, deterrent!" the president tweeted.

The president also noted that he's holding off on a proposal to raise the legal age for purchasing certain firearms from 18 to 21.

"On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)," the president tweeted.

Florida, which enacted a gun law raising the age limit to 21, was sued by the National Rifle Association on Friday.

Senior administration officials said the federal government intends to help provide "robust" firearms training for qualified teachers and other school personnel in the wake of the Florida high school massacre last month.

The president also is endorsing a bill to encourage greater reporting of criminal convictions to an FBI database

that is used to stop firearms purchases by people who are not allowed by law to own guns.

"Very strong improvement and strengthening of background checks will be fully backed by White House. Legislation moving forward," Mr. Trump tweeted.

The president also said bump stocks, accessories that enable a semi-automatic rifle to fire more rapidly, "will soon be out." The Justice Department took regulatory steps last weekend to officially ban the devices.

Among the administration's proposals is establishing a federal commission to study school safety. It will be headed by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

Gun-control groups are criticizing the president's plan as weak, and say it shows that Mr. Trump didn't want to anger the NRA.

"Americans expecting real leadership to prevent gun violence will be disappointed and troubled by President Trump's dangerous retreat from his promise to break the Washington gridlock around gun violence and to stand up to the NRA," said Avery Gardiner, co-president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety, called the plan "a complete failure of leadership."

"On gun safety, they shrug and pass the buck to the states," he said of the administration. "But when it comes to the NRA's priorities, they're happy to push for a federal mandate that guts state laws. Now Congress needs to get a backbone and meet the moment after Parkland, with or without the administration."

On School Shootings, Ignorance Is Not Bliss

By The Editorial Board

USA Today, March 12, 2018

President Trump's new plan to secure schools after last month's slaughter of 17 students and teachers in Parkland, Fla., is chock-a-block with ideas, some worthwhile (strengthening background checks and restraining orders) and some half-baked (arming teachers).

Most conspicuously absent is any call for banning semiautomatic assault weapons such as the one used in Parkland, or even raising the age to purchase them to 21 nationally — a step Trump initially said he supported but then backed away from amid National Rifle Association opposition.

Another missing piece that could guide the nation, and the commission to be chaired by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, toward data-driven solutions to gun violence: freeing scientists to explore the causes of, and uncover the solutions for, a shooting epidemic that kills 35,000 Americans every year.

Scientists, you ask, are not already free to do this?

No, not really. There's actually a federal statute — won by the NRA decades ago — that all but bars research on gun

violence. A little knowledge, evidently, is a bad thing when you're advocating for guns anywhere and everywhere.

It's the reason why every mass killing in our schools or churches or concert grounds only produces another round of ideas based more on gut instinct than hard evidence.

Is it true, as NRA chief Wayne LaPierre repeatedly asserts, that "to stop a bad guy with a gun, it takes a good guy with a gun"? In other words, does arming more citizens reduce gun deaths or does it increase them? Is it also true that banning assault-style rifles and large-capacity magazines could truly diminish mass killings?

One reason we don't have better answers to these questions is the 1996 Dickey Amendment — named for the author, then-Rep. Jay Dickey, R-Ark., — which bars the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from funding research that "may be used to advocate or promote gun control."

An identical change in 2012 similarly restricts the National Institutes of Health.

Cleverly ambiguous, the phrasing worked beyond the NRA's wildest dreams. It discourages private-sector research as well as federally funded studies. The NRA said it meant no harm to "legitimate medical science."

But today, among leading causes of death in America, gun violence is among the least in research by a wide margin, according to a Journal of the American Medical Association review. For example, gun violence receives just 0.7% of the research funds that go to sepsis, which kills as many people.

There's a simple fix: Jettison the Dickey Amendment.

Before he died last year, Dickey himself — noting how federal research into preventing traffic fatalities has saved hundreds of thousands of lives over the decades — regretted his role in curtailing the study of gun violence. "I wish we had started the proper research and kept it going all this time," he told The Huffington Post.

Since Parkland, other leading Republicans have added their voices. Bob Goodlatte, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said that gun violence, particularly as it relates to mental health, should be a target of federal research. And Trump's new secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, acknowledged the obvious in promoting these studies. "We're in the science business and the evidence-generating business," he told Congress.

Azar might have added that schools are in the learning business. Yet, when it comes to protecting students from gun violence, the nation is willfully ignorant.

NRA: Don't Use Tax Dollars To Promote Gun Control

By Chris W. Cox

USA Today, March 12, 2018

In the wake of the tragedy in Parkland, Fla., the media are claiming that the NRA and our supporters in Congress are opposed to government-funded research on criminal violence perpetrated with firearms. Nothing could be further from the truth. We, along with a majority of Americans, believe that research is important in identifying the root causes of violence.

To be clear, Congress did not restrict the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from studying firearms and violence. Instead, it restricted government funding from being used to advocate or promote gun control. In the 1990s, when this restriction was passed, that's exactly what the CDC was doing — advocating for gun control under the auspices of "research." One CDC official was even quoted in 1994 that he envisioned a public campaign to make guns like cigarettes, "dirty, deadly — and banned."

The NRA's position at the time, which has not changed, is that tax dollars should not be used to take sides in a policy debate. This violates the most basic principle of science, in which objective research should be the goal, rather than a biased policy position against individual firearm ownership.

Government-funded research on guns and violence has been going on for years. Reports indicate that the National Institutes of Health, which is covered by the same restriction, issued over \$11 million in grants for such projects between 2014 and 2017. Similar studies that focus on the underlying causes of violence would also not be prohibited.

With this in mind, one might ask why gun control proponents are pushing to have the restriction eliminated. The answer is simple, and it has nothing to do with funding more research, but the desire to use the legitimacy of the CDC to push a political agenda.

Anti-gun advocates know that research by government agencies advocating for more gun control would be viewed as credible by the American people, because such agencies are expected to have an objective, unbiased mission. And this is why limiting funding against such policy advocacy is needed. Americans should be able to trust our institutions, especially those conducting research on our behalf.

The NRA fully supports research, both private and public, which examines the root causes of violence in our communities. What we do not support is using tax dollars to promote gun control. The problem is not funding restriction, but researchers who are unable to drop their anti-gun bias long enough to examine this issue objectively.

Chris W. Cox is executive director of the National Rifle Association Institute for Legislative Action.

Obama-era School Safety Rules May Be Repealed

By Dave Boyer

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

President Trump's new federal commission on school safety will consider repealing an Obama administration policy that discourages expelling or suspending unruly students due to concerns that such disciplinary actions unfairly target minorities.

The president's school safety plan, released in detail Monday, said the commission, chaired by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, will look at killing the Obama policy known as "Rethink School Discipline."

President Obama's approach to school discipline was announced in 2014 by then-Attorney General Eric Holder and then-Education Secretary Arne Duncan. The Obama Justice and Education departments advised school districts that disciplinary policies could constitute "unlawful discrimination" under federal civil rights law if they resulted in a "disproportionate and unjustified effect on students of a particular race."

The approach was also incorporated into President Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative that focused on providing mentorship and opportunities to minority boys and young men.

In recent years, large school districts have moved away from punishing misbehaving students with suspensions or expulsions, favoring ideas like "restorative justice" or programs that focus on the reasons why a student misbehaved.

In placing its sights on that policy, the Trump administration could be signaling that the time for such thinking has ended.

The proposal is among the president's policy recommendations in the wake of last month's shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, that killed 17 people and wounded 15 others.

The Justice Department unveiled other school safety proposals Monday night, including holding federal agencies accountable for failing to update the National Instant Criminal Background Check System; ordering the FBI to identify states that are not reporting arrests to state databases and more aggressive prosecution of individuals who lie on gun applications.

Another surprise is that Mr. Trump's school safety commission intends to study "effects of press coverage on mass shootings," according to the administration's outline.

Some people in law enforcement and other professions believe that heavy media coverage of such tragedies encourages "copycat" attacks.

Two researchers at Western New Mexico University released a study in 2016 that said mass shootings have increased threefold since 2000, and that media coverage of shooters' actions inspires others who also seek such "fame." They asserted that at least one-third of such shootings could be prevented by more responsible reporting.

The researchers concluded that the best way to discourage mass shootings is not to name the shooters at all in the media, and to focus all the attention on the victims. In several recent tragedies, chief law-enforcement officials have refused to refer to a shooting suspect by name and beseeched the media not to report the killer's identity.

In releasing his plan to prevent school shootings, Mr. Trump defended himself against heavy criticism from Democrats, the media and gun-control groups that he was abandoning a proposal to raise the age limit from 18 to 21 for purchasing certain rifles. The commission will examine that proposal, but Mr. Trump isn't calling on Congress to pass a law raising the age limit.

"On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)," the president tweeted Monday.

On Friday, The National Rifle Association sued Florida, which enacted a gun law that raised the age limit to 21.

Rep. Adam Schiff, California Democrat and a frequent Trump critic, tweeted, "Actually, Mr. President, there's overwhelming political support for gun safety reform, including age limits, universal background checks, and an assault weapon ban. Like you said, too many Republicans are scared of the NRA — including, plainly, you."

John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety, said Mr. Trump was caving to the National Rifle Association.

"It's no surprise that after spending \$30 million to get him elected, the NRA has already convinced the president to back away from common-sense policies he supported less than a week ago and instead support their dangerous dream of putting guns in schools," he said, also blasting the president's proposal to arm more teachers. "America's teachers don't want to carry and school safety experts agree it's a reckless idea."

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Mr. Trump still supports raising the age limit for purchasing certain long guns. But she said he wants to focus on other legislation that has more backing in Congress, including a bill to improve reporting to an FBI database of criminal convictions that is used to prevent prohibited felons from purchasing firearms.

"He hasn't backed away from these things at all. But he can't make them happen with a broad stroke of the pen," Mrs. Sanders said.

• Jeff Mordock contributed to this report.

Justice Department Pushes For Putting More Officers In Schools

By Marilyn Icsman

USA Today, March 13, 2018

The Justice Department announced Monday its plans to prioritize giving grants to local and state law enforcement agencies that plan to hire more officers in an attempt to improve school safety.

The Bureau of Industry and Security and National Institute of Justice are currently looking into school safety issues but have not yet released information on whether school-resource officers, or SROs, actually make schools safer.

"No child should have to fear going to school or walking the streets of their neighborhood," Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in a statement. "Today, I am directing the Department of Justice to take a number of new steps that will help make schools and the American people safer from the threat of gun violence."

Sessions will also encourage each state to make sure local law enforcement is reporting to state-run databases that the FBI accesses during background checks. Right now, reporting that information is voluntary on the part of states.

DOJ can't compel states to share the information, but said missing dispositions for guns, as well as arrest records without a final disposition, are significant issues. Sessions has directed the FBI to identify local jurisdictions that are not reporting arrests to state databases and jurisdictions that are not providing all of their records identifying people prohibited from possessing guns for mental health reasons.

There will also be increased priority given to federal accessibility of domestic violence convictions, which have often been associated with mass shootings. The accused shooter in the Parkland massacre, along with more than 50% of mass shooters before him, had committed domestic or family abuse, according to the gun control nonprofit Everytown for Gun Safety.

Additionally, Sessions has ordered federal prosecutors to more aggressively pursue "lie and try" cases. Those occur when someone lies on a federal form about whether they fall under one of the 10 categories that would make someone prohibited from owning a gun. If that person is then caught by the federal background check system, then they would be tried.

DOJ's announcement comes a day after administration officials said the White House would support arming teachers who volunteered and would use federal money to offer "rigorous firearms training" to qualified employees.

DOJ said it would "full participate" in a school safety commission headed by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. It will also review and make necessary changes to its process for handling its FBI tip line, which has come under scrutiny after failing to keep the alleged Parkland shooter from acquiring guns.

Justice Department Unveils Its Own School Safety Proposals

By Jeff Mordock

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

The Department of Justice unveiled its own school safety proposals in Monday night, which will work in tandem with President Donald Trump's plan.

The proposals include holding federal agencies accountable for failing to update the National Instant Criminal Background Check System; ordering the FBI to identify states that are not reporting arrests to state databases and more aggressive prosecution of individuals who lie on gun applications.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions Monday sent a letter to FBI Director Christopher Wray asking the agency to identify problems with updating the NICS system, which is supposed to work to prevent individuals with mental health issues from purchasing guns.

"It is essential that relevant mental health determinations by state and local officers are accessible to the NICS system," Mr. Sessions wrote. "We cannot allow an individual who is prohibited from possessing firearms to pass a background check simply because the information was not made available to you."

There are about 2,083 state and federal agencies responsible for providing information for background checks across the country, according to Bureau of Justice Statistics report. Agencies required to update information to NICS include courts, state health departments and mental health hospitals.

The NICS system has improved in recent years. Since becoming law in 1993 as part of the Brady Bill, NICS stopped just 3,200 gun purchases in its first nine years. By the end of 2016, it had stopped 4.7 million mentally ill people from buying guns.

Mr. Sessions also sent a letter to U.S. Attorneys across the country demanding "swift and aggressive" prosecution of people who lie on their firearm applications. He ordered each U.S. Attorney to meet with ATF officials in their district to discuss ways to review and revise prosecution procedures in these cases.

Lying to pass a background check is a federal crime that carries a 10-year prison sentence, but not every state enforces or prosecutes the crime. For example, in Florida where the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting took place, the law is rarely enforced.

Nationwide, fewer than 32 so-called "lie and try" cases a year were considered for prosecution, according to a 2016 report from the Justice Department's inspector general.

"Criminals and other prohibited persons who attempt to thwart the background check process by lying on the required forms threaten to undermine this important crime prevention

tool," Mr. Sessions wrote. "Such conduct cannot be tolerated."

Justice Department Outlines Gun Measures

Sessions urges U.S. attorneys to increase prosecutions and states to submit more data on background checks.

By Josh Gerstein

Politico, March 12, 2018

The Justice Department is unveiling a series of steps aimed at reducing gun violence, including directives aimed at bolstering the system used to conduct background checks on would-be gun buyers.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions will be sending letters to governors and state attorneys general nationwide urging states to submit more complete data to the federal system, including details on the outcome of criminal cases, officials said on Monday.

Sessions has also directed federal prosecutors across the country to step up prosecutions of individuals found to have lied on applications to buy firearms. And he announced that the Justice Department would prioritize grant funds for police departments seeking to train armed officers to be located at schools — something President Donald Trump has repeatedly urged after the school shooting in Florida last month that killed 17 people.

"No child should have to fear going to school or walking the streets of their neighborhood," the attorney general said in a statement. "We are increasing the number of school resource officers, improving background checks and more aggressively prosecuting those who illegally attempt to purchase a firearm, and reviewing and enhancing the way our law enforcement agencies respond to tips from the public."

Some of the steps were previously announced by the White House or have been priorities of the Justice Department for some time.

Sessions has said since he took over as attorney general last year that he wanted to see more prosecutions of those lying in the background check process. On Monday, he sent a letter to U.S. Attorneys, ordering them to meet with the top agent at the local Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives office and coordinate on boosting prosecution of so-called lie-and-try cases.

"Criminals and other prohibited persons who attempt to thwart the background check process by lying on the required forms threaten to undermine this important crime prevention tool," Sessions wrote. "Such conduct cannot be tolerated. We must vigilantly protect the integrity of the background check system through appropriate prosecution of those who attempt to circumvent the law."

The Justice Department is also offering up to \$1 million in emergency grant funding to Broward County and other

jurisdictions that responded to the shooting at the high school in Parkland, Florida, last month.

When awarding new grants to states and localities, the Justice Department is also vowing to prioritize applications seeking funding for so-called school resource officers. However, it's unclear how much money will be affected because Congress has yet to fund public safety grant programs for the current fiscal year.

Justice Department Pushes For Better Reporting To Gun Background Check System Following String Of Mass Shootings

By Kelly Cohen

Washington Examiner, March 13, 2018

The Department of Justice on Monday night rolled out firearm safety measures in the wake of the shooting that left 17 dead at a high school in Parkland, Fla., last month, as well as numerous other high profile mass shootings in Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs, Texas.

The scope of the new measures is vast and includes a big push by Attorney General Jeff Sessions to improve the reporting of information by state and local jurisdictions, as well as federal agencies, to federal databases that is then used to determine if someone should be approved to purchase a firearm.

In a memo sent Monday to the FBI director, Sessions directs Christopher Wray to have the FBI better support state and local jurisdictions that want to improve their information sharing — both with one another and with the federal government — and to identify those that do not fully report arrests that could disqualify someone from purchasing a firearm.

Sessions is also directing the FBI to identify what state and local jurisdictions do not make mental health records and domestic violence convictions available to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, or NICS.

It is voluntary for state and local jurisdictions to report such information into their databases that is then used by NICS during the firearm-buying process.

Sessions told Wray, "[W]e cannot allow an individual who is prohibited from possessing firearms to pass a background check simply because information was not made available to you."

"This is an important time to lift the system to a higher level," Sessions wrote.

Federal agencies also have 45 days to prove full compliance with a federal requirement to report relevant records to NICS, Sessions announced. Though federal agencies are required by law to report to NICS, there are no statutory punishments for not reporting.

The man responsible for the shooting at a church in Sutherland Springs was prohibited from buying or possessing

a firearm due to a domestic violence conviction in a court martial while serving in the U.S Air Force. However, the Air Force failed to record the conviction in its database, which would have been flagged by NICS when the gunman legally bought his firearms.

The Justice Department also announced Monday it will implore schools to hire more school resource officers and prioritize giving grants to state and local jurisdictions that want to do so.

"No child should have to fear going to school or walking the streets of their neighborhood," Sessions said in a statement.

The Justice Department also reiterated that it has submitted a proposed regulation to the Office of Management and Budget that would "effectively ban the manufacture, sale or possession" of bump stocks — an announcement made Saturday.

One of the biggest pushes by gun control advocates after the Parkland shooting was to make it illegal to own or sell bump stocks — devices which allow a semi-automatic firearm to mimic the firing rate of fully automatic weapons, which are banned for civilian use. Though bump stocks were not used in the Parkland shooting, they were found among the weapons used in the deadly October 2017 attack in Las Vegas that left 58 people dead and more than 400 others injured.

Sessions is also directing all U.S. attorneys to more "swiftly and aggressively" prosecute cases against people who lie on their application to buy a firearm about something that would otherwise disqualify them from being approved to purchase.

"Under my tenure as Attorney General, we have already increased federal gun prosecutions to a 10-year high — and we are just getting started. With these new measures in place, we are better positioned to disarm criminals and protect the law-abiding people of this country," Sessions said.

Sessions Calls On U.S. Attorneys To Aggressively Prosecute Gun Buyers Who Lie On Background Checks

By Sari Horwitz

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced Monday that U.S. attorneys will more aggressively enforce the law that makes it a crime for gun buyers to lie on their federal background checks, one of several steps Justice Department officials outlined as part of the Trump administration's response to last month's deadly school shooting in Parkland, Fla.

The Justice Department also will increase the presence of law enforcement officers at schools and continue to review

the way law enforcement agencies respond to tips from the public, Sessions said.

"No child should have to fear going to school or walking the streets of their neighborhood," Sessions said in a statement.

Lying on a federal background check when purchasing a firearm is a felony that can be punished by up to five years in prison, but the crime is rarely prosecuted, according to current and former Justice Department officials. Sessions ordered federal prosecutors to "swiftly and aggressively" prosecute cases against people who are prohibited from having firearms and lie on a federal form to pass the background check.

The announcement comes nearly a month after the massacre that left 17 dead at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and as Trump's administration rolls out policy proposals that focus largely on school safety and mental health rather than gun control. The White House announced Sunday that it would help provide firearms training to some schoolteachers and establish a Federal Commission on School Safety to be chaired by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

Neither the Justice Department initiatives nor Trump's plan contain significant proposals to change gun laws. Instead, Sessions's actions enhance existing programs and call for more aggressively enforcing current law. The White House has also backed away from Trump's initial call to raise the minimum age to purchase some guns from 18 to 21 years old.

The National Education Association, the country's largest teachers lobby, along with other groups sharply oppose the idea of arming teachers. Many of the students who survived the Parkland shooting — along with gun control groups — have called for tighter restrictions on gun purchases. Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said that Democrats will push for passing universal background checks, legislation on protection orders and a debate on banning assault-style weapons.

Such measures are opposed by the National Rifle Association, which endorsed Trump and spent an estimated \$30 million to get him elected.

"Despite all the tough talk from the president, all the televised meetings where he talked about significant change, the [Trump] plan is a moral abomination that centers on buying teachers guns," said Peter Ambler, executive director of Giffords, the gun control organization founded by Gabrielle Giffords, the former congresswoman who survived being shot in the head in 2011.

"The idea that you can turn schools into fortresses and protect them as to opposing the root cause is plain wrong," Ambler said. "My mom spent most of her career as a public school teacher. And the idea of her groping a handgun or an

AR-15 trying to stop someone massacring kids with an assault weapon is insane."

Sessions said the Justice Department will help state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies hire more "school resource officers," sworn law enforcement officers responsible for preventing crime and protecting schools. Using existing programs, the department will provide support for firearms and "situational awareness training" to school and law enforcement personnel, he said.

Sessions also has taken an incremental step toward banning "bump stocks," the devices that allow a shooter to fire a semiautomatic firearm as though it was an automatic weapon. On Saturday, the attorney general submitted to the Office of Management and Budget a proposed regulation on bump stocks.

Las Vegas shooter Stephen Paddock attached a bump stock to his semi-automatic firearm and effectively turned it into a machine gun that left 58 people dead and hundreds more injured in a matter of minutes. After that incident, the NRA said that bump stocks "should be subject to additional regulations."

The bump stock proposal requires OMB's approval and public comments before they can be banned.

In 2010, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives concluded that it could not regulate bump stocks because such devices did not meet the legal definition of a machine gun. But Sessions, recently speaking to a group of state attorneys general, said he believed the devices could be banned.

The effort is likely to face lawsuits from manufacturers who cite ATF's original opinion from 2010.

Federal agencies are required by law to report to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) the relevant records about individuals who are prohibited from possessing a gun under federal law.

Sessions is calling on the FBI and other relevant agencies to certify within 45 days that they are in compliance with that law or have a plan to become fully compliant.

There is no indication that 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz, the suspect in the Parkland shooting, would have been stopped by an improved background check system. He legally purchased his AR-15 and several other firearms.

But NICS has come under scrutiny after several other high-profile shootings.

Dylann Roof, who killed nine people three years ago at a black church in Charleston, S.C., was able to buy his gun after errors by the FBI and local law enforcement led to his name not being entered into criminal-record databases when he was arrested and had admitted to drug possession.

The Air Force said it failed to follow policies for alerting the FBI about the domestic violence conviction of Devin P. Kelley, who killed more than two dozen churchgoers in Sutherland Springs, Tex., last year. Because his conviction

was not entered into NICS, Kelley was allowed to buy firearms.

Tens of thousands of people wanted by law enforcement officials were removed last year from the FBI criminal background check database that prohibits fugitives from justice from buying guns. The FBI purged the names from the database after the Justice Department changed its legal interpretation of "fugitive from justice" to say it pertains only to wanted people who have crossed state lines. That meant fugitives previously prohibited under federal law from purchasing firearms can buy them, unless barred for other reasons.

Trump White House Declares Support For California-Style Gun Confiscation Orders

By Awr Hawkins

Breitbart, March 12, 2018

The Trump White House released policy papers Monday declaring full support for California-style firearm confiscation orders.

Breitbart News has a copy of the release and it urges states to adopt Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs). Such orders allow firearms to be confiscated with a judge's approval.

The White House suggests that ERPOs "allow law enforcement, with approval from a court, to remove firearms from individuals who are a demonstrated threat to themselves or others and temporarily to prevent individuals from purchasing new firearms." They stressed that the orders "should be carefully tailored to ensure the due process rights of law-abiding citizens are protected."

California adopted similar gun confiscation laws in 2015 and Southern California Public Radio reports that 190 orders requiring confiscation were issued 2016-2017 alone.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott (R) signed California-style confiscation orders into law on Friday and the White House is urging other states to follow suit.

On March 1, 2018, Vice President Mike Pence took pains to focus on the need to guard "due process" in issuing ERPOs. Trump responded to Pence's statement by saying, "Or, Mike, take the firearms first, and then go to court."

Armed And Safe? At Ohio Schools, The Security Plan Includes Teachers And Guns.

By Joe Heim

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

RIVERSIDE, Ohio — The safes were installed last summer. Thirty-two in all. Spread out among the four elementary schools, the two middle schools, the high school and the administration building of the Mad River Local Schools district here on the outskirts of Dayton.

On Aug. 14, the first day of school for the district's 3,900 students, each safe contained the centerpiece of the district's new security plan: a semiautomatic pistol and a removable magazine loaded with bullets.

The guns are not there for law enforcement. There are no armed security guards at the schools. The weapons, paid for with money from the district's operating budget, are for teachers and staffers who have volunteered and trained to be part of the school's response team if a shooter enters a building. Each team member has access to a safe that can be reached quickly in case the unthinkable happens.

Chad Wyen, the district's soft-spoken, 42-year-old superintendent, thinks about the unthinkable often. He has twin daughters in Mad River schools. To Wyen, arming staffers and teachers will make all the students in the district safer.

"A bad guy is going to do whatever he wants in that building until someone either addresses him, or he runs out of ammunition, or he shoots and kills himself," Wyen said in an interview in his office. "Otherwise, you are literally a sitting duck in a school if you are not able to respond. And I'm not willing to do that. I'm not willing to put our kids at risk."

In 10 states, schools allow teachers and staff members to be armed, with administrators' permission. After the shooting that took 17 lives at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida last month, pressure is increasing to expand that approach.

The White House said Sunday night it would establish a Federal Commission on School Safety chaired by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and will begin working with states to provide "rigorous firearms training" to some schoolteachers.

President Trump and the National Rifle Association have been clear: Make schools fortresses. Employ every deterrence. Fight fire with fire. Arm teachers.

"Armed Educators (and trusted people who work within a school) love our students and will protect them," Trump tweeted last month. "... Shootings will not happen again — a big & very inexpensive deterrent."

Florida legislators passed a gun bill Wednesday that includes \$67 million for the training and arming of certain school staffers, though it excludes full-time teachers from those who are eligible to volunteer. Gov. Rick Scott (R) signed it Friday.

During her visit Wednesday to Stoneman Douglas, DeVos said arming teachers should not be mandated, but she pointed to gun and safety training programs for teachers in Texas and Polk County, Fla., as examples for schools that want to increase security.

"I think that's a model that can be adopted and should be an option for schools, for states, for communities," DeVos said.

But gun-control proponents and teachers unions have also been clear: Raise the age to buy guns. Expand mental

health access. Ban assault-style weapons. Don't make teachers do double duty as volunteer security guards.

"The gun lobby's proposals to arm teachers are a deliberate, outrageous distraction from the real threats we face and the serious policy discussion we need," said Ari Freilich, a lawyer with the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

According to a Washington Post analysis, it could cost more than \$1 billion to arm and train 20 percent of American teachers — a percentage suggested by Trump.

The White House said Sunday the administration will help military veterans and retired law enforcement transition into new careers in education and that the Justice Department will work with local and state law enforcement to provide firearms training for teachers and school staffers.

Fifty-nine percent of Americans oppose training teachers to carry guns, according to a recent NPR poll. And 51 percent of respondents in a Washington Post-ABC News poll last month said the Stoneman Douglas shooting could not have been prevented by equipping teachers with guns. Forty-two percent said it could have.

But even as elected leaders and national organizations weigh the political impact of arming teachers, some school districts are already embracing programs that put guns in the hands of educators and staffers.

'Our children are protected'

The debate over arming teachers is now percolating nationally, but it has been stirring in school districts across Ohio for the past five years. It began soon after the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut that left 26 students and educators dead. A number of Ohio districts, particularly those in more rural areas, worried that their schools were vulnerable and began weaponizing staff members and training them to respond to a shooter.

"Ohio is really ground zero for this," says Kate Way, an educator and co-producer of the documentary "G Is for Gun: The Arming of Teachers in America," which airs this month on public television in Ohio. "My sense after following this for three years is that the move to arm teachers is growing like wildfire here."

Wyen did not sugarcoat the potential dangers for teachers and staffers in his district who wanted to take part.

"We told them, you have to understand that if you choose to do this, you're putting your life at risk, and you have to be comfortable with that," he says. They do not get extra pay.

From his staff of 460 system-wide, 50 volunteered to take part. All had experience with guns and possessed concealed-weapons licenses. Each was interviewed several times. Why do you want to do this, they were asked. Can you move toward a threat? If a suspect is a student, can you shoot to stop him from hurting others?

Wyen selected 32 teachers and staff members for his team. Their identities are known only to Wyen and law enforcement. Their anonymity is part of the district's security strategy. The only sign to outsiders of their existence is one that greets visitors at every entrance to Mad River schools: "WARNING: Inside this building our children are protected by an armed and trained response team."

Jade Deis, a freshman at the district's high school, says she feels safer knowing that teachers are armed. "What's a stapler going to do against a gun?" she asks. For Deis and her friends, the new program hasn't been the subject of much discussion.

"The teachers don't talk about it, they don't show the guns," she says. "I kind of forget it's there."

But some parents, students and teachers have raised concerns that having guns in school makes it more likely that an accidental shooting — or worse — could occur.

"It's good that they want to protect us, but what if a teacher just pops off? Anyone can go crazy, and then they have the gun right there," says Jalen Yarbrough, a freshman. "Or let's say a kid gets rowdy. The teacher could say, 'I feared for my life and I shot him.'"

Amanda Gallagher, who has two daughters in grade school in the Mad River district, expressed concerns to administrators that not enough research has been done about the dangers of having guns in schools.

"They seem very concerned with response times but not as concerned with the rest of the risks of having armed teachers in school," Gallagher says. "I can appreciate how afraid they are. I'm very concerned that my kids aren't going to come home from school one day, but it doesn't make me feel better that the teachers are armed. It just gives me new things to worry about."

In Ohio, the decision on whether to arm teachers is made by school districts, and they are not required to make that information public, so there are no figures on how many of the state's 610 districts have armed teachers.

Michael Hanlon, superintendent of the Chardon school district in northeast Ohio, says he is often asked if his district arms its teachers.

Six years ago, 17-year-old T.J. Lane entered Chardon High School with a .22-caliber semiautomatic handgun. He killed three students and injured three others. In a matter of minutes, the school joined "a club that no one wants to be part of," Hanlon says.

Whenever there's a school shooting anywhere in the country, he says, teachers and staffers in his district feel it to their core. "You can never escape it."

And after every shooting, Hanlon hears renewed calls to arm teachers. His district has chosen not to.

"If we saw the same thing happen in a hospital, I don't think we'd start saying we need to arm doctors and nurses," Hanlon says. "They have important lifesaving work to do. And

the work that teachers do is just as important. The argument to arm teachers once again diminishes the core work of teachers."

'A serious, serious thing'

Sitting at a conference room table at the Premier Shooting and Training Center just north of Cincinnati, Joe Eaton says he hears the same questions from all of the teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and administrators who take part in the gun and tactical training his organization provides to schools across Ohio.

"Am I going to be able to do this? Am I going to be able to perform? Am I going to be outgunned?"

The 52-year-old grandfather, IT professional and gun enthusiast says he also has a question for them: If the shooter is a student or a former student, as most school shooters are, will you be able to stare down the barrel of your gun and pull the trigger?

"The rules of engagement are, if someone is murdering people in your school, you kill them as soon as possible and stop the killing," says Eaton, the program director for Faster Saves Lives, an emergency-response training program for schools created five years ago by the Buckeye Firearms Foundation, an Ohio nonprofit gun advocacy and training group.

According to Eaton, roughly 1,000 of the 1,300 participants in the Faster program have come from more than 200 Ohio school districts. Demand has never been higher.

When the program began, most participants were former law enforcement, military or hunters, Eaton says. But in the past two years, that has changed: More than half had never touched a firearm until their schools asked them to take part.

During a three-day course, participants study the history of active-shooter situations, engage in tactical drills and maneuvers, practice firearm skills, and work on trauma aid techniques.

So far, none of the Ohio teachers trained to use guns have been forced to do so in a school, Eaton says.

"We're giving them simple, easy, clearly defined training and tools that they can use in the event of the worst day possible at their school," he says.

One of the first Ohio districts to arm its teachers was Sidney, a rural community less than an hour north of Dayton. There, the training is extensive and participants are carefully selected, says Superintendent John Scheu, who launched the program five years ago.

"This is not just giving someone a gun. It's not a hobby. It's a serious, serious thing," says a Sidney teacher who participates in the program and asked not to be identified because of the school's security protocol. "I love to train for it, and I never, ever want to use that training. If your mentality is to be the cowboy, you don't belong in this program."

The teacher, who started his career just before the 1999 attack at Columbine High School in Colorado that left 15 dead, says he understands that arming teachers isn't for every school district.

"Teachers are nurturers," he says. "And now we're protectors."

But Lori Hedberg, who heads the Sidney teachers union, says that's a choice teachers shouldn't have to make. She fought to keep the school district from adopting the program. The union lost. Hedberg continues fighting.

"This is a knee-jerk response that won't solve the problem," says Hedberg, who has been with the district for 29 years. "Let's beef up our barriers so a teacher won't have to shoot a gun. I don't want a teacher to ever shoot a gun. That is not part of your job description."

Don't Deny The Link Between Serious Mental Illness And Violence

By DJ Jaffe

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

DJ Jaffe, an adjunct fellow at the Manhattan Institute, is the author of "Insane Consequences: How the Mental Health Industry Fails the Mentally Ill."

Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old whose alleged shooting rampage claimed 17 lives at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., last month, was sick. His family knew it. His neighbors knew it. Local law enforcement and mental-health professionals knew it.

Yet, like so many tragedies involving the seriously mentally ill, no one was able to prevent the rampage. Why?

As the family member of someone with serious mental illness, and as someone who has spent 30 years helping other families with seriously ill members, the answer is clear: The system often prevents relatives from getting help for loved ones who have serious mental illness until after they have become a danger to themselves or others. Too often this means after someone — often a family member — is injured or killed.

According to an investigative report by NPR, Cruz was "the subject of dozens of 911 calls and at least two separate tips to the FBI." Most of the calls were for threats or acts of violence against his family, including apparently holding a gun to his mother's and brother's heads. Cruz's father died in 2004, and his mother died last November of complications from influenza, leaving him with little family support.

Family members are often caretakers for the seriously mentally ill and, as a result, too often victims of violence. In a 2016 report by the nonprofit Treatment Advocacy Center, my co-authors and I found that serious mental illness — typically untreated — is associated with an estimated 29 percent of family homicides and 7 percent of all homicides. In 2013,

these fatalities outstripped the number of deaths related to meningitis, kidney infection or Hodgkin's disease.

Yet too often, mental-health advocates hide behind the platitude that the mentally ill are no more violent than others. That may be true for those being properly treated for their illness, but it is not true for the untreated, including those suffering from schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

We families with seriously ill members know that. And we hope that, after the Parkland massacre, lawmakers will listen to us rather than to the mental-health industry.

A major problem is that the federal government doles out around \$150 billion in mental-health funding, but doesn't require programs receiving the funds to serve the seriously mentally ill. Instead, the funds are often spent to improve "wellness" in the general population through yoga classes or "mindfulness" training.

We can help stop future Parklands by focusing our spending on those who need help the most and are most likely to become dangerous without that help.

Here are six suggestions that would save lives and help families get their mentally ill loved ones the treatment they need:

First, increase the number of available psychiatric beds by eliminating a Medicaid rule that forbids states from using Medicaid funds for seriously mentally ill adults who need long-term hospitalization.

Second, end the practice of requiring someone to become dangerous before their families can intervene to help them. We could do that by supplementing the standard by which we commit mentally ill people to health facilities — presently "danger to self or others" — to also include "need for treatment," "grave disability" and "lack of capacity."

Third, pass strong assisted-outpatient treatment laws so judges can order the most seriously mentally ill people to stay in treatment while continuing to live in the community. A 2017 Manhattan Institute report found that assisted-outpatient treatment in New York state reduced rates of arrests and incarceration by 83 percent and 87 percent, respectively. It also led to a 77-percent decrease in hospitalization and a 74-percent decline in homelessness. In 2016, Congress appropriated \$20 million for this treatment, but much more is needed.

Fourth, free parents of mentally ill children from the handcuffs of health-privacy laws so they can learn what is wrong with their kids, as well as help refill prescriptions and facilitate treatment compliance.

Fifth, allow people to take out restraining orders — known as red-flag orders — that would remove guns from mentally ill people who threaten themselves or others, and prevent them from making future firearms-related purchases. Also, prevent mentally ill Social Security recipients who have representative payees from purchasing and owning guns.

Finally, rein in the Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness program and the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act division of the Justice Department. PAIMI defends the right of the psychotic to refuse treatment, while CRIPA has brought lawsuits against state hospitals, resulting in people with serious mental illness moving out of these institutions and into community settings. Eliminating those activities would make it easier for families to facilitate appropriate care for our seriously mentally ill loved ones.

Denial of the association between serious mental illness and violence may be politically correct and well-intended. But, too often, it ends in tragedies such as the Parkland shooting — and another scramble for answers we already have.

One Of The World's Greatest Sculptors Warns America About The NRA

By Philip Kennicott

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

Last year, the National Rifle Association released its now infamous "The Clenched Fist of Truth" video in which a brief clip of Anish Kapoor's sculpture "Cloud Gate" appeared as a stand-in for Chicago and the city's most famous recent resident, Barack Obama. As NRA spokeswoman Dana Loesch chanted in a hypnotically angry voice, "they use their ex-president to endorse the resistance," Kapoor's shiny steel doughnut form, which sits like a bulbous arch in Millennium Park, flashed on the screen for barely a second. But that was more than enough to anger Kapoor, who has fought and failed to force the powerful gun advocacy group to remove it. Monday, in a statement, Kapoor condemned "the NRA's nightmarish, intolerant, divisive vision" that "perverts everything that Cloud Gate — and America — stands for."

Kapoor, one of the most significant and celebrated artists working today, holds copyright over the commercial use of images of Cloud Gate, according to the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. Although tourists can freely photograph the sculpture, advertisers who want to film it are directed to Kapoor's office for permission, which he never gave to the NRA. But after looking at his legal options, and considering the financial and emotional cost of battling the "extremely aggressive, legalistic" advocacy group, Kapoor has given up hope for successful negotiation or litigation. "I decided it wasn't worth the effort, much to my shame, because one does want to defend the ethical integrity of the work."

Instead, he has released a blistering statement in collaboration with the gun control advocacy group Everytown for Gun Safety.

"It plays to the basest and most primal impulses of paranoia, conflict and violence, and uses them in an effort to create a schism to justify its most regressive attitudes," wrote

Kapoor, a British sculptor born in Mumbai. "Hidden here is a need to believe in a threatening 'Other' different from ourselves."

The video's tone, rhetoric and imagery suggest a troubling evolution of NRA strategy. "Cloud Gate" appears along with other iconic images of urban America, including architect Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and a brief glimpse of Spanish-born American artist José de Creeft's beloved "Alice in Wonderland" sculpture in Central Park.

Some images appear to be shot with an infrared filter, giving them a spooky, surreal quality, with dramatic sky effects and tree leaves appearing bright white. The video producers also use time-lapse to speed up the motion of people and cars in the foreground, a device reminiscent of the opening sequence to the Netflix drama "House of Cards," with its intimation of stylish evil and corruption in the nation's capital.

But despite the haunted quality of the visuals, the NRA's urban imagery isn't particularly scary. Indeed all of the scenes used in this call to arms against urban America show successful urban spaces. These are picture postcard sites sought out by tourists from both red and blue states, and they are teeming with life. Unlike the anti-urban rhetoric of a generation ago, which stressed scenes of urban decay — ramshackle buildings and trash-strewn empty streets — the NRA focuses not on blight but vibrancy. In the language of urban designers, they represent the city with scenes of "activated" urban design.

Kapoor sees that as part of an "invidious" effort to recast urban space as threatening. Speaking from his studio in London, he said the NRA videos seem designed to rebrand "emblems of liberal America" as "foreign objects," and thus threatening. Lauren Markowitz, a spokeswoman for Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, agrees, saying, "Rather than using a picture of our great city to sell their awful propaganda, the NRA should use this moment to reflect on their disgraceful efforts to block meaningful gun reforms that would save lives in Chicago and across the nation."

The NRA's visual logic suggests a new twist in the culture wars. Cities, today, are thriving and the old rhetoric of the city as a kind of cancer spreading into the heartland no longer works. So the NRA has adopted a new narrative: The city, no matter how successful, is a pernicious collective endeavor that will ultimately decay into violence and oppression. The video in which "Cloud Gate" appears is succinct in this prediction: From its opening images of public sculpture and architecture it moves directly into images of protest and violence and finally an urgent exhortation from the narrator, "The only way we save our country and our freedom is to fight this violence of lies with the clenched fist of truth," with marked stress on the repeated use of the word "our."

Public sculpture is integral to the larger claim that urban success leads inexorably to individual repression. Kapoor's "Cloud Gate" took years to design and build and was mounted in an enormously ambitious \$475 million public park built over railroad tracks near the shore of Lake Michigan. By some accounts, this could be seen as civic folly and a waste of public and private funds. But "Cloud Gate" was also part of a symbolic 21st-century act of urban "healing" performed on the broken, industrial landscape of the early 20th century.

The use of time-lapse and black-and-white images may be designed to undermine faith in this kind of collective action toward better urban design and well-structured, activated public places. It makes crowds of people seem spectral and vanishing, while urban objects like "Cloud Gate" take on ominous, fetishistic power. The suggestion is that efforts at improving public space aren't just vain and "utopian," they are doomed to fail, dragging the rugged libertarian ethos of American individualism down with them.

But there may be a message even darker than that one: These beloved urban icons aren't just symbols of a hated cosmopolitanism, but trophies to be captured. Unlike other NRA videos, which stress patriotism, American values and the sacrifice of veterans, Loesch speaks explicitly of defeating an enemy. "They will perish in the political flames of their own fires," she says in another video, which juxtaposes the Golden Gate Bridge (declared a "wonder of the modern world") with a chaotic political protest.

The implication is subtle: We won't just defeat urban elites, we will appropriate what they have built. Given the stark and widening inequalities between many red and blue states when it comes to longevity, educational opportunity and quality of life, it's a disturbing but not surprising development.

Given the success of "Cloud Gate" — the city of Chicago claims it is the most popular tourist site in the Midwest — it can't easily be recast as an oppressive urban vanity project. But in the new culture wars, in which one side must win and the other must lose, it can be held up as an object up for grabs. Just as the NRA hopes to pass legislation that will allow states' concealed carry permits to be valid even in other states that don't allow concealed carry, there is the suggestion that one day, perhaps, these great urban icons will belong not to the cities that built them, but to the larger gun culture. To its members, the organization offers through-the-looking-glass promise. When the battle is won, you will look into the brilliant, reflective surface of this sculpture and see not the hated elites, but you, triumphant.

Trump, Trudeau Disagree On Steel Tariffs' Connection To NAFTA

By Dave Boyer

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

President Trump told Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Monday that new U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum make it more urgent to conclude renegotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The White House said Mr. Trump and Mr. Trudeau spoke by phone about the tariffs announced by the president last week. Mr. Trump has exempted Canada and Mexico from the tariffs while NAFTA is being renegotiated.

Mr. Trump told the prime minister that wrapping up a new NAFTA deal is important to "ensure the vitality of United States and North American manufacturing industries and to protect the economic and national security of the United States."

Mr. Trudeau said on CNBC Monday that Canada's exemption from the tariffs have nothing to do with NAFTA talks.

"We don't link together the tariffs and the negotiations for NAFTA, but we're happy to continue to move forward on the negotiations," he said in an interview on "Power Lunch."

He also said the tariffs on Canada would hurt the U.S. almost as much.

"Millions of jobs on both sides of the border depend on continued smooth flow of trades," Mr. Trudeau said.

Trump Says Commerce Secretary Will Talk Tariffs With EU

[Associated Press](#), March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Monday his commerce secretary will talk to the European Union about tariffs Trump argues have been unfair to the United States.

Trump wrote on Twitter: "Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross will be speaking with representatives of the European Union about eliminating the large Tariffs and Barriers they use against the U.S.A. Not fair to our farmers and manufacturers."

The president announced last week that the United States would impose heavy tariffs on imported steel and aluminum, with some countries potentially exempted. Amid fears of a global trade war, the 28-member European Union is among those seeking exemptions.

The Commerce Department did not respond immediately to a request for information about any planned meetings between Ross and EU officials.

Asked about Trump's tweet, the EU in a statement said that "no further meetings as such are planned at the moment."

U.S. Trade Rep. Robert Lighthizer met Saturday with European Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmstroem to discuss the tariffs and the exemption procedures. Malmstroem said she got "no immediate clarity on the exact U.S. procedure."

Over the weekend, Trump argued that the U.S. has been abused economically by the EU, saying they were "wonderful countries who treat the U.S. very badly on trade."

According to an EU statement, the average EU tariff is 3 percent, not much more than the United States' average 2.4 percent. The EU imposes a 10 percent tariff on cars, versus America's 2.5 percent.

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U.S. Trading Partners Weigh Tariff Responses

Allies adopt approaches from defiance to conciliation in seeking to avoid Trump's planned levies

By Andrea Thomas, Paul Vieira And David Winning
[Wall Street Journal](#), March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

The National Security Tariff Ruse

Commerce relies on bad data and can't even persuade the Pentagon.

[Wall Street Journal](#), March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Conservative Groups Fire Warning Shot Over Obamacare Aid

Decry reinsurance, 'cost-sharing' money as irreversible bailouts

By Tom Howell Jr.

[Washington Times](#), March 12, 2018

Conservative pressure groups fired a warning shot Monday at members of Congress eyeing measures that would free up federal funding to stabilize Obamacare's wobbly markets.

Heritage Action and more than a dozen other organizations said attempts to subsidize extra-pricy customers with federal tax dollars or restore "cost-sharing" payments that President Trump canceled would prop up a failing law, without injecting the type of free-market reforms that Republicans promised when they won the White House and Congress in 2016.

"These proposals are costly, likely to become permanent, and unnecessary. Worst of all, bailout payments keep the failed Obamacare infrastructure in place and do nothing to address the real reasons premiums and deductibles are rising—the law's regulations, mandates, and subsidy structure," the conservative groups wrote Monday.

Republican leaders are figuring out whether to include the provisions in a must-pass omnibus spending bill before a March 23 deadline.

The effort's been upended by a side debate over abortion — conservatives say none of the funding should subsidize plans that cover the procedure, though Democrats are pushing back at pro-life demands.

Democrats' votes might be needed to push the measures across the finish line, if many conservatives balk at bolstering Obamacare or the underlying spending package.

Insurers are set to request double-digit price hikes on the individual market, which includes Obamacare's exchanges, in most states for 2019.

Companies cite a lack of healthy customers in the program and the GOP's repeal of the "individual mandate" — the 2010 program main prod for goading customers in.

Moderate Republicans and party leaders worry they'll face public backlash for rising premiums, since the GOP controls every lever of government.

Senate Health Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander and Sen. Susan Collins, Maine Republican, have partnered with Democrats on bills that would reel in rate hikes by resuming reimbursements for insurers who pick up low-income customers costs on the Obamacare exchanges and freeing up billions for a "reinsurance" program that blunts the cost of customers with big claims, so others don't have to pay more.

They say the package will also save taxpayer money over time, because federal subsidies must rise with premiums under Obamacare's framework.

Conservative groups urged lawmakers to resist those arguments, saying federal "bailouts" will be hard to reverse and that states can pursue reinsurance programs on their own, if necessary.

The groups, including ones back by the influential Koch brothers, want the GOP to revive repeal-and-replace efforts instead of patching up President Obama's signature domestic achievement.

"Americans deserve relief from Obamacare's damage and rising premiums through real reform, not ill-conceived policies like bailouts that simply paper over the underlying causes," the groups wrote.

"Lawmakers should fulfill their longstanding promise of repealing and replacing Obamacare, not setting the dangerous precedent of bailing it out."

Republicans Haven't Fixed The 'Great Obamacare Heist'

By Christopher Jacobs

The Federalist, March 12, 2018

Do Republicans hope conservatives forgot when Republicans actually put taxpayers ahead of health insurers, rather than trying to shovel them more money?

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) made comments in a January radio interview supporting a "bipartisan opportunity"

to fund Obamacare's Exchanges, specifically through mechanisms like reinsurance.

How quickly the speaker forgets — or wants others to forget. Obamacare already had a reinsurance program, one that ran from 2014 through 2016. During that time, non-partisan government auditors concluded that, while implementing that reinsurance program, the Obama administration violated the law, diverting billions of dollars to insurers that should have gone to the United States Treasury. After blasting the Obama administration's actions as the "Great Obamacare Heist," and saying taxpayers deserved their money back, Republican leaders have for the past eighteen months done ... exactly nothing to make good on their promise.

Have congressional Republicans lost their memory? Or do they hope that conservatives have lost their memories, and forget when Republicans actually put taxpayers ahead of health insurers, rather than trying to shovel more money insurers' way?

Section 1341 of Obamacare imposed a series of "assessments" (some have called them taxes) to accomplish two objectives. Section 1341 required the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to collect \$5 billion, to reimburse the Treasury for the cost of another Obamacare program that operated from 2010 through 2013. The assessments also intended to provide a total of \$20 billion — \$10 billion in 2014, \$6 billion in 2015, and \$4 billion in 2016 — in reinsurance funds to health insurers subsidizing their high-cost patients.

Unfortunately, however, the "assessments" on employers offering group health coverage did not achieve the desired revenue targets. The plain text of the law indicates that, under such circumstances, HHS must repay the Treasury before it paid health insurers. But the Obama Administration did no such thing — it paid all of the available funds to insurers, while giving taxpayers (i.e., the Treasury) nothing.

The non-partisan Congressional Research Service and other outside experts agreed that the Obama administration flouted the law to give taxpayers the shaft. In September 2016, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) agreed: "We conclude that HHS lacks authority to ignore the statute's directive to deposit amounts from collections under the transitional reinsurance program in the Treasury and instead make deposits to the Treasury only if its collections reach the amounts for reinsurance payments specified in section 1341. This prioritization of collections for payment to issuers over payments to the Treasury is not authorized."

At the time GAO issued its ruling, Republicans denounced the Obama Administration's actions, and pledged to fight for taxpayers' interests: Multiple Chairmen — including the current Chairs of the House Ways and Means Committee and Senate Budget, HELP, and Finance

Committees — said in a statement that, as a matter of "fairness and respect for the rule of law clearly anchored in the Constitution," the Obama "Administration need to put an end to the Great Obamacare Heist immediately."

Sen. John Barrasso (R-WY), Chairman of the Senate Republican Policy Committee, said that "the Administration should end this illegal scheme immediately."

A spokesman for the House Energy and Commerce Committee said that, "We expect the Administration to comply with the independent watchdog's opinion, halt the billions of dollars in illegal Obamacare payments to insurers, and pay back the American taxpayers what they are owed."

Since all this (self-)righteous indignation back in the fall of 2016 — six weeks before the presidential election — what exactly have Republicans done to follow through on all their rhetoric?

In a word, nothing. No legislative actions, no hearings, no letters to the Trump Administration — nothing. Some experts have suggested that the Trump administration could file suit against insurers, seeking to reclaim taxpayers' cash, but the administration has yet to do so.

In September 2016, outside analysts explained why the Obama administration prioritized insurers' needs over taxpayers' — and the rule of law: "I don't think the Administration wants to do anything to upset insurers right now." That same description just as easily applies to Republican congressional leaders today, making their promise to end the "Great Obamacare Heist" yet another one that has thus far gone unfulfilled — that is, if they ever intended to make good on their rhetoric in the first place.

Chris Jacobs is founder and CEO of Juniper Research Group, a policy consulting firm based in Washington.

Trump: Time For Another Tax Cut?

By Dave Boyer

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

The more President Trump jokes about working on another tax cut, the more it sounds like he's serious.

At a White House event Monday celebrating the World Series champion Houston Astros, Mr. Trump singled out House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Kevin Brady, Texas Republican, who led the congressional effort to pass tax cuts last year.

"Kevin, are we going for an additional tax cut, I understand? Phase two?" Mr. Trump said. "We're actually very serious about that, Kevin."

Mr. Trump made similar comments last month in West Virginia, telling Mr. Brady, "we'll get 'em even lower."

On that occasion, Mr. Brady said he believes there could be more improvements to the tax code on capital gains, pension reform, employee ownership and other features.

U.S. Posts Biggest Budget Deficit Since 2012

By Sarah McGregor

Bloomberg News, March 12, 2018

The U.S. recorded a \$215 billion budget deficit in February — its biggest in six years — as revenue declined.

Fiscal income dropped to \$156 billion, down 9 percent from a year earlier, while spending rose 2 percent to \$371 billion, the Treasury Department said on Monday. The deficit for the fiscal year that began in October widened to \$391 billion, compared with a \$351 billion shortfall the same period a year earlier, according to the Treasury report.

The data underscore concerns by some economists that Republican tax cuts enacted this year could increase the U.S. government debt load, which has surpassed \$20 trillion. The tax changes are expected to reduce federal revenue by more than \$1 trillion over the next decade, while a \$300 billion spending deal reached by Congress in February could push the deficit higher.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin has said the tax cuts will pay for themselves through faster economic growth.

A combination of higher income tax refunds and a drop in the withholding of individual income and payroll taxes led to the reduction in receipts, according to an analysis by the Congressional Budget Office released last week.

"Increases in wages and salaries were more than offset by a decline in the share of wages withheld for taxes," the CBO said. That trend reflects new guidance issued in January by the Internal Revenue Service over how much of employees' paychecks should be withheld based on the new tax rules, according to the CBO.

The deficit in February was also impacted by the timing of certain payments, CBO said.

Trump Notches Worst Deficit Since Great Recession

February's shortfall tops \$215 billion

By Stephen Dinan

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

The federal fiscal picture took a giant step backward in February, notching a one-month deficit of more than \$200 billion — the sort of numbers posted during the worst days of the Obama administration.

Treasury Department numbers released Monday showed the government spent \$370.9 billion last month, but collected just \$155.6 billion in revenue, leaving a \$215.2 billion deficit.

It's the biggest shortfall since February 2012, when the government was still doling out stimulus cash in trying to dig out of the Wall Street collapse-fueled Great Recession.

Analysts caution against reading too much into a single month's numbers because shifts in payments across weekends can affect totals, but February's deficit appears to reflect surges in federal spending — and that's even before

the budget-busting deal reached by Republicans and Democrats in January kicks in.

Social Security, Medicare, disaster relief and Pentagon spending drove the increases last month, each rising 5 percent or more, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Net interest on the accumulated debt also spiked 8 percent.

Democrats Show Little Willingness To Fight GOP Ahead Of Spending Deadline

By Mike Debonis

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

For months, Democrats promised to use their leverage on government spending to protect young immigrants at risk for deportation after President Trump canceled the program. More recently, they have demanded Congress pass universal background checks for gun buyers in the wake of another deadly school shooting.

Now, with Congress less than two weeks from a funding deadline, Democrats are showing little willingness to corner Republicans on those issues.

Their lack of appetite to provoke another showdown represents a shift after two previous fights resulted in brief government shutdowns and risks alienating the party's liberal base crucial in midterm elections. But several events have sapped the party's resolve. Moderate Democrats flinched after a three-day January shutdown fought over immigration; court decisions have left Trump's cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in legal limbo; and many Democrats are quietly eager to pass the next spending bill and lock in more money for key agencies.

"The current predicament illustrates how you really only had one bite at the apple of taking a stand over the funding of the government on this [DACA] issue," said Brian Fallon, a Democratic consultant who is close to Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) "The previous attempt was either going to be successful, or this gambit was going to fall apart, and what's happened is it has fallen apart."

Congressional leaders are now hashing out a \$1.3 trillion "omnibus" spending package ahead of a March 23 deadline. Despite the lack of resolution on DACA and no clear path forward on gun control after a Feb. 14 shooting left 17 dead inside a Florida high school, party leaders are brushing off suggestions of a fresh showdown.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), who delivered a record-breaking eight-hour floor speech on the DACA issue ahead of the last spending deadline, has said neither a DACA extension nor a gun-control package "has to be part of" the spending legislation but could instead pass in separate bills that Democrats have little power to force through the Republican-controlled Congress. And House Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) said the spending bill

"needs to be considered on its own merits, and then we ought to move ahead on DACA."

Instead of delving into that fight, Democrats appear trained on battles happening within the confines of the spending bill itself — where they feel they are on firmer political ground trying to fend off what they consider to be Republican overreach on controversial policies.

On immigration, for instance, while there is little stomach to push DACA, there is an emerging scuffle over whether Congress will grant additional funds to the Trump administration to beef up border security, fund more immigration enforcement officers and increase the number of detention beds for immigrants who have been apprehended.

Democratic leaders and immigrant advocates appear to be united behind a strategy of bowing to political reality and setting aside the DACA fight for now to defang what they call the "deportation machine."

"I don't think anyone in Washington believes that they will be willing to withhold their votes over DACA on another spending bill," said Angel Padilla, policy director for the activist group Indivisible. "But we're hoping that they make it clear to Republicans that there are red lines on enforcement activities."

Leaders of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus leaders last week sent a letter to top congressional leaders, provided to The Washington Post by a Democratic aide, calling on them to "reject any increased funding for [the Department of Homeland Security's] wasteful and harmful enforcement system." And Hoyer, in a statement Friday, called on Republicans to "stop insisting on poison pill policy riders, such as funding for President Trump's border wall, more detention beds, and increased interior enforcement."

The pivot comes a month after Democrats splintered on a budget bill that delivered \$151 billion in additional funding to domestic agencies but left DACA unaddressed. Less than two days after Pelosi delivered her eight-hour speech, 73 Democrats broke ranks and joined Republicans to approve the deal. In the Senate, already cowed by the fizzled shutdown, 35 of 46 Democrats voted for it.

The pending omnibus will now dole out that increased funding to specific agencies and programs, funding them through Sept. 30.

"Democrats got a lot of what they wanted, and immigration has not elevated itself to that rarefied top tier where Democrats across the board are willing to go to the mat," said one Democratic aide who closely follows immigration issues and spoke on the condition of anonymity to freely discuss private talks.

On guns, there has been growing public pressure for action by Congress since the Parkland, Fla., high school shooting, and Democrats have previously engaged in dramatic steps on the gun issue, notably the June 2016 House sit-in that followed the deadly attack on an Orlando

nightclub. But that pressure has not yet been trained directly on the spending bill.

According to a senior Democratic aide, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to candidly discuss talks, Democrats are pushing for repeal of the Dickey Amendment, a provision dating to 1996 that has been interpreted as preventing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from studying gun violence as a public health issue. That fight has the backing of major organizations advocating new gun controls but has been waged quietly, the aide said, to avoid provoking a public fight with gun-rights advocates.

"Because of the gun lobby, Americans are effectively blocked from knowing even the scope of our gun violence problem, let alone the possible solutions to it," said John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety. "This shouldn't be controversial — freeing up funds for basic research and shedding sunlight would only help."

Some Democrats are pushing to wage these fights out in the open, even as party leaders believe they can achieve better results — and play better politics — by avoiding a high-profile confrontation.

"The caucus is unified in insisting that we deal with gun violence and we deal with the Dream Act, so I think everything tactically is still on the table right now," said Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-Md.). "The outrage is growing in the country that we have almost universal consensus for a universal background check, and nothing's happening, and we have to stop acting like a failed state."

But another obstacle to Democrats hoping for action on immigration and guns are defensive battles over other provisions in the spending bill where Republicans are hoping to advance conservative priorities now that they have control of both chambers of Congress and the White House.

"We assume they're going to need Democratic votes, and we're trying to do the best we can, using any ounce of leverage we have, to work on the issues we care about," said Rep. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.), a senior Democratic appropriator.

One brewing partisan fight concerns the perennial flash point of abortion politics. The parties are sparring over language pertaining to federal family-planning grants, as well as Republican policy provisions that would block funding for health-care providers that perform abortions, allow health-care providers to opt not to perform procedures they find morally objectionable and bar funding for scientific research using fetal tissue.

House Republicans are rejecting a Senate-crafted compromise that seeks to prevent the Trump administration from changing the rules for awarding family-planning and teen pregnancy-prevention grants to favor groups that advocate sexual abstinence over other groups, including Planned Parenthood. Democrats are pushing to preserve that compromise in the final bill.

"I've consistently made clear that undermining women's health and expanding restrictions on women's access to the full range of reproductive health care — including at trusted providers like Planned Parenthood — is a complete nonstarter in our negotiations in Congress," said Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), who chairs the Appropriations subcommittee on labor, health and human services.

Trump Speaks With Larry Kudlow About Joining White House As Economic Adviser

By Robert Costa, Damian Paletta And Josh Dawsey
[Washington Post](#), March 12, 2018

Media personality Larry Kudlow, a loquacious and energetic advocate of low taxes and free trade, has emerged as a leading candidate to replace Gary Cohn as director of the White House's National Economic Council, people briefed on the process said.

President Trump has spoken twice in recent days with the longtime CNBC commentator about succeeding Cohn, according to three people familiar with the discussions who were not authorized to speak publicly.

While the phone conversations with Kudlow — one on Sunday and another on Monday — have been favorable, Trump has yet to make a final decision about an offer, the people said. Still, Kudlow is now widely seen within the West Wing as a finalist for one of the most powerful economic posts in the administration.

Beyond the phone calls with the president, Kudlow has also spoken with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Jared Kushner, Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law, the people said, citing those talks as further evidence of how the selection process is moving quickly.

Kudlow was unavailable for comment.

Kudlow, 70, is described by White House officials as someone who connects with the president personally and politically. Born and raised in New Jersey, Kudlow and Trump share a hard-charging personality and relish being media figures — both have hosted television programs. Kudlow has also been an informal Trump adviser over the past year.

Kudlow was an adviser to Trump during the 2016 campaign, working closely with Mnuchin on the design of an initial tax plan. But Kudlow, in media appearances in the past month, has been critical of President Trump's new plan to impose tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, opposition that for other candidates might be disqualifying.

Kudlow worked in the Reagan White House, but has spent much of his time in recent years working in the media, for CNBC and others.

On March 3, Kudlow joined Steve Moore and Arthur Laffer in a column for CNBC.com that was sharply critical of Trump's proposal to impose the new tariffs.

"Trump should also examine the historical record on tariffs, because they have almost never worked as intended and almost always deliver an unhappy ending," they wrote.

These views, which are very divergent from Trump's new approach, have given some White House officials pause but have not disqualified Kudlow from consideration, the people briefed on the discussions said. Still, they could become a factor as Trump nears his final decision, which could come within days.

But Kudlow has told Trump that he and the president agree on the bigger points of economic policy, such a focus on tax cuts and growth, the people said.

Some advisers have also told Trump to consider Christopher Liddell for the post. Liddell is the former chief financial officer of General Motors, Microsoft and International Paper. He has been at the White House since last year, but he hasn't left a distinct impression on economic policy, an area that Cohn and Mnuchin have mostly dominated.

Cohn announced last week he would be leaving the NEC. Cohn's influence within the West Wing had waned, as Trump had recently decided to adopt a protectionist trade policy that infuriated the former Goldman Sachs president.

Cohn made numerous media appearances while running the NEC but also ran a detailed staff process that aimed to elevate — and, at times, squash — certain parts of Trump's economic agenda. It is unclear if Trump wants his next NEC director to advance an ambitious agenda or spend more time with the media defending the changes that have already taken place, such as tax cuts and efforts to roll back regulations.

Larry Kudlow Is The New Favorite To Replace Gary Cohn

By Maggie Haberman And Jim Tankersley
New York Times, March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON — Larry Kudlow, a CNBC television commentator who has informally advised President Trump on economic issues, is currently the top contender to head the National Economic Council, according to three people close to the president.

Mr. Kudlow emerged Monday as the latest favorite in a changing rotation of potential replacements for Gary D. Cohn, who said he would resign after losing a battle over the president's longstanding desire to impose large tariffs on steel and aluminum imports.

Mr. Trump spoke with Mr. Kudlow on Sunday and again on Monday, according to two of the people close to the president. The job has not been formally offered, but the president was encouraging of Mr. Kudlow, the people familiar with the discussions said, and he is likely to interview him in the coming days.

Mr. Kudlow declined to comment. "I can't talk to you," he said when reached on his cellphone.

Mr. Kudlow fits the profile of the type of adviser Mr. Trump would probably favor for the second-wave of hires in an administration where he has sought people who "look the part." Mr. Kudlow, who advised Mr. Trump during his campaign and after he became president, is someone with whom Mr. Trump has a rapport, and he is a media personality whom the president enjoys watching on television, according to aides.

Mr. Trump often wants to find people with impressive résumés to fill out his West Wing, and Mr. Cohn — a former top executive at Goldman Sachs — was a key example of that kind of hire. But Mr. Trump's advisers recognize that they are unlikely to draw another top executive and had been looking to hire from inside the West Wing.

Mr. Kudlow had been publicly critical of Mr. Trump's push for stiff and sweeping tariffs on steel and aluminum imports.

But Stephen Moore, a friend of Mr. Kudlow's and a fellow campaign adviser to Mr. Trump, said Monday that the administration's tweaks to its tariff plan — such as providing country exclusions — had made it significantly more palatable to Mr. Kudlow.

When Mr. Trump said this month he planned to impose tariffs on imported steel and aluminum from every foreign country, Mr. Kudlow, along with Mr. Moore and the economist Arthur Laffer, wrote a critical column urging the president to reconsider. "Trump should also examine the historical record on tariffs," they wrote, "because they have almost never worked as intended and almost always deliver an unhappy ending."

Mr. Trump went ahead with the tariffs, but he signaled some countries, such as Mexico and Canada, could be exempt from them. Mr. Moore said that change was important.

"Larry, I think, will be supportive" of more tailored tariffs, he said. "My own hope is, if Larry gets this job, he can have an impact in pushing Trump in a good direction on this."

Mr. Moore said that Mr. Kudlow would serve Mr. Trump well as a salesman for his economic agenda, including tax cuts and deregulation, and that his history with Mr. Trump was a factor in his consideration.

"I think Trump values Larry's contributions to the campaign," said Mr. Moore, a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation. "Larry gave Trump a lot of legitimacy early on, with conservatives. Larry's just a great communicator on the economy, and that's what Trump needs."

Heading into the weekend, the top contender to replace Mr. Cohn was Christopher Liddell, who is a special assistant to the president working with the Office of American Innovation on a team led by Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser. Mr. Liddell's previous experience

as a chief financial officer for Microsoft had been seen as a selling point.

But after The New York Times reported that Mr. Liddell was under consideration, Mr. Trump received pushback from people both inside and outside the White House, according to the people close to the president. On Monday, The Wall Street Journal's editorial board wrote a piece critical of Mr. Liddell's views on free trade.

On Sunday, Mr. Trump again began discussing Mr. Kudlow as an option, the people close to the president said. On Monday, his advisers said he was leaning toward Mr. Kudlow, but stressed that the mercurial president is hard to predict and could change his mind several times.

Mr. Kudlow, if chosen, would be the rare revival in Mr. Trump's circle — he criticized the president after the emergence of the "Access Hollywood" tape in October 2016. He later re-endorsed him, but Mr. Trump, who nurses grudges, was angry for some time, according to people close to him.

Mr. Kudlow is a CNBC commentator and radio host and a former Wall Street economist. He is a disciple of Mr. Laffer, the godfather of supply-side tax cuts, whom Mr. Kudlow credits for helping him overcome an alcohol- and substance-abuse problem more than 25 years ago. During the campaign and throughout Mr. Trump's first year in the White House, Mr. Kudlow urged the president to go big with his tax-cut plan.

After Republicans pushed the \$1.5 trillion cut through Congress late last year, Mr. Kudlow praised it effusively, predicting it would usher in annual growth of 3 percent to 4 percent on a long-run basis — a more optimistic assessment than most independent economists have offered — and would boost Republicans in this year's midterm elections.

"Trump and the G.O.P. are on the side of the growth angels with the passage of powerful tax-cut legislation to boost business investment, wages and take-home family pay," Mr. Kudlow wrote in December. "The Democrats, meanwhile, are left with stale class-warfare slogans about tax cuts for the rich."

Lawrence Kudlow Being Considered For Top White House Economic Post

Kudlow, a cable TV economic analyst, was expected to interview for position as soon as this week

By Michael C. Bender And Nick Timiraos

Wall Street Journal, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Larry Kudlow A Strong Contender To Replace Cohn: Source

By Reuters Staff

Reuters, March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Colleague Says CNBC's Kudlow Is Leading Contender For White House Economic Adviser

By Dave Boyer

Washington Times, March 12, 2018

Larry Kudlow is the leading contender to head President Trump's National Economic Council, one of Mr. Kudlow's colleagues at CNBC reported Monday.

"If he was offered it, he would take it," said CNBC's Jim Cramer.

The president is seeking to replace Gary Cohn, who announced his resignation last week after failing to stop Mr. Trump from imposing tariffs on steel and aluminum.

Later on Monday, CNN reported, citing "a source familiar with his conversations," that Mr. Trump had told people he'd decided on Mr. Kudlow.

Mr. Trump also reportedly is "seriously considering" Chris Liddell, former chief financial officer for General Motors and Microsoft, for the White House post.

Mr. Kudlow, a free-trade advocate, has declined to comment. A senior contributor on CNBC, Mr. Kudlow worked on economic policy in the Reagan administration and started his career at the Federal Reserve.

Trump Close To Tapping Kudlow To Succeed Cohn

The president, known for making snap hiring decisions, has sent mixed signals on whom he wants as his next economic adviser.

By Andrew Restuccia And Ben White

Politico, March 12, 2018

President Donald Trump is close to choosing economic analyst Larry Kudlow as his new top economic policy adviser, according to three people briefed on the internal deliberations.

After souring on Kudlow because he publicly criticized the president's decision to impose steep tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, Trump is now leaning heavily toward tapping the CNBC contributor and former Reagan administration official to lead the National Economic Council, the people said.

One administration official said on Monday that an announcement could be imminent, perhaps within 24 hours. But others cautioned that the decision had not yet been finalized, adding that Trump has been known to change his mind without warning.

Trump spoke with Kudlow twice in recent days, according to a White House aide said, who added that the

president has been impressed by his performance on cable news.

A White House spokeswoman did not respond to a request for comment on Monday night.

The decision comes after the president sent mixed signals in recent days about whom he wanted for the job, leaving those around him struggling to keep up.

By Monday afternoon, at least two candidates to take over for Gary Cohn as director of the National Economic Council — NEC Deputy Director Shahira Knight and the White House director of strategic initiatives. Chris Liddell — appeared to be out of the running entirely, while Kudlow's prospects had greatly improved.

Some White House officials said they were unsure as of Monday afternoon exactly what the president would decide — and when. Aides have grown accustomed to working for a president who often makes decisions without warning. Trump abruptly announced via Twitter last summer that John Kelly, who at the time was Homeland Security secretary, would become his chief staff.

The president's revived interest in Kudlow to some extent reflects the White House's limited options. Economists have widely panned Trump's tariff decision, and some potential picks are hesitant to join an administration defined by chaos and facing an expanding special counsel investigation.

In the end, people close to both men said the final decision could come down to chemistry, a factor that bodes well for Kudlow. Trump feels comfortable with Kudlow, whom Trump has known for years. One person familiar with the issue said the president could simply call Kudlow and offer him the job, without bothering to go through a formal interview process.

"He brings a couple big assets to the table," said conservative economist Stephen Moore. "One, he is a great communicator of economics, one of the best in the country, especially for the free-market ideas that Trump is mostly espousing. And two, Larry has really great relationships with members of Congress, certainly on the Republican side but also among Democrats who may disagree with him but like him."

Moore added that even though Kudlow has argued against tariffs and other protectionist policies, he would back the president's policies once they are finalized. "That's certainly a condition of the job," Moore said. "If you work for the president you have to stand by him."

But Kudlow has detractors in the administration. One White House official noted that if Kudlow didn't have a personal relationship with the president, he probably wouldn't get past the administration's informal personnel vetting standards, which have been used to sideline potential nominees who have been critical of Trump in the past.

Kudlow knocked Trump in 2016 after an audio recording was released in which Trump bragged about groping women during an appearance on "Access Hollywood."

"The 'vile' tape, as I call it, is inexcusable. I was absolutely furious," Kudlow said on CNBC at the time. He went on: "I hope Mr. Trump gets his act together. But if he continues to drop into these rabbit holes, I'll write in Mr. Pence."

People close to Kudlow said he was interested in succeeding Cohn and would accept the job. Kudlow declined to comment.

Unlike Cohn, who took the job with the task of pulling off tax reform and with the widespread presumption that he would be named chairman of the Federal Reserve, the next NEC director won't have a clear policy goal or an obvious promotion on the horizon.

Instead, it appears Trump's focus is shifting toward policies backed by his trade adviser Peter Navarro — who himself wanted the NEC job — and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross.

In the coming weeks, Trump is expected to announce the results of the administration's investigation into allegations that China does not adequately protect intellectual property rights.

Administration officials and others closely tracking the issue said the administration was weighing tariffs on more than 100 Chinese products, in addition to possible investment restrictions.

A free-trader like Kudlow at the NEC would also have to fight to protect the North American Free Trade Agreement and possibly try to find a way for the administration to slip back into the giant Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal.

During an interview on a recent podcast, Kudlow warned that withdrawing from NAFTA would be a "calamitously bad decision" that "would turn business against the president, where he's got a lot of goodwill, and would frankly blow up the whole stock market."

But NEC staffers have made it clear that they would revolt — and even quit — if Trump taps White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, an avowed trade hawk who has clashed with Cohn, for the job. And Navarro is no longer considered a top candidate.

Cohn announced his resignation last Tuesday amid the fight over the steel and aluminum tariffs.

He was supportive of promoting Knight, a former lobbyist who played a central role in writing Trump's tax plan, but she has since told friends she's not interested in the job and may leave White House altogether in the coming months. Cohn has also been supportive of Kudlow's getting the job.

Aides said on Monday that Liddell, a White House aide and ally of Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, was no longer a leading candidate for the position, even though the

president was eyeing him for the role as recently as this past weekend. His standing fell rapidly after The Wall Street Journal published a scathing editorial about him on Sunday.

Liddell's candidacy was also poorly received by some inside the administration who feared that he wouldn't be a formidable enough foil for Navarro. "He's just a wild card," one senior administration official said of Liddell. "I really don't know what to expect."

So on Monday the spotlight returned to Kudlow, who has many of the attributes Trump likes. He's well known, smooth on television — and for now, at least, his sharp criticism of Trump's policies in recent weeks appears to be a side note.

"This is someone who the president really trusts" despite his criticism of some of Trump's policies, said FreedomWorks president Adam Brandon. "He's a person who can get out on television and explain pro-growth economics. Larry is the absolute perfect person to deliver that message."

Who's Afraid Of Higher Wages?

A surge in investment, productivity and profits has analysts fretting about an 'overheated' economy.

By Larry Kudlow And Stephen Moore
[Wall Street Journal](#), March 12, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

NASA's Acting Chief To Retire Even As Congress Has Yet To Confirm Trump's Nominee

By Usa Today
[USA Today](#), March 12, 2018

NASA Acting Administrator Robert M. Lightfoot Jr. is retiring April 30 even as President Trump's permanent choice to lead the agency remains stuck in Congress.

Lightfoot, who started in 1989 at the Marshall Center in Huntsville, Ala., as a test engineer, has spent 14 months as the acting administrator for NASA. His tenure would have been considerably shorter but the Senate has yet to confirm Trump nominee James Bridenstine, a GOP congressman from Oklahoma.

On Monday, Lightfoot sent a "bittersweet" goodbye in a note to employees:

"I cannot express enough my gratitude to the entire NASA team for the support during my career and especially the last 14 months as your acting administrator. The grit and determination you all demonstrate every day in achieving our missions of discovery and exploration are simply awe inspiring. I leave NASA blessed with a career full of memories of stunning missions, cherished friendships, and an incredible hope for what is yet to come."

Lightfoot said he plans to work with the White House "on a smooth transition to the new administrator."

Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., thanked Lightfoot "for his many years of outstanding service and leadership at NASA," and he prodded the White House to "nominate a space professional for NASA administrator who will actually garner strong bipartisan support."

Nelson strongly opposes Bridenstine, saying he's a divisive figure whose presence could impede the bipartisan support necessary for NASA's long-term agenda to expand space exploration.

The Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee on a party-line vote narrowly approved sending his name to the full floor for confirmation. But he doesn't appear to have the votes for approval yet.

The delay is infuriating some Republican House colleagues of Bridenstine, not only because he's a political ally but also out of concern that NASA cannot fully handle its complex charge without a permanent administrator at the helm.

"It is always a value to have the person the president wants in this position and I think that would be important for us all," Lightfoot said. "But I can tell you for the past year I've had no trouble getting access to the people I've needed to have access to."

The lack of a permanent administrator comes at a pivotal point for NASA.

Trump has placed new emphasis on the agency's importance by reviving the National Space Council headed by Vice President Mike Pence, announcing a re-pivot to the moon, and proposing the privatization of the International Space Station by 2025.

In addition, missions to develop the powerful Space Launch System designed to take astronauts to Mars within 20 years, develop a network of private rockets to ferry passengers to the space lab and launch the James Webb Space Telescope are approaching key milestones..

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Cal., who sits on the House Science, Space and Technology, committee, blasted senators for their "arrogance" in not approving Bridenstine, a commercial space advocate who has been endorsed by prominent astronauts such as Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin.

"This is the product of a couple of senators who are bullheaded and couple of senators who are basically watching out for their own little domain rather than what's good for the overall country," Rohrabacher said without using names.

Robert Lightfoot, NASA's Acting Administrator, To Retire As Trump's Nominee Is Stalled

By Kenneth Chang

New York Times, March 12, 2018

NASA has been without a permanent leader for more than a year. Now the agency's temporary leader is leaving, too.

In an email to the space agency's employees on Monday, Robert M. Lightfoot Jr., the acting administrator, announced that he would retire on April 30.

Mr. Lightfoot said he was leaving "with bittersweet feelings," but did not say why he was retiring.

"I cannot express enough my gratitude to the entire NASA team for the support during my career and especially the last 14 months as your acting administrator," Mr. Lightfoot wrote.

Mr. Lightfoot's impending departure could leave a vacuum at the top of NASA just as a revived National Space Council, which last existed more than 20 years ago, looks to revamp American space policy.

The council, chaired by Vice President Mike Pence, is to coordinate what various agencies, military and civilian, are doing in space. Two priorities are streamlining regulatory processes for space companies and returning astronauts to the moon.

The Trump administration's latest budget proposal for NASA would end direct American financing of the International Space Station by 2025 and spur the development of commercial alternatives.

The previous administrator, Charles F. Bolden Jr., stepped down at the end of President Obama's term. Mr. Lightfoot, who was associate administrator, the third-highest ranking position at NASA, took over as acting administrator.

In September, President Trump nominated Representative Jim Bridenstine, Republican of Oklahoma, to be the next administrator. But the Senate has yet to vote to confirm Mr. Bridenstine.

All 49 Democrats in the Senate appear unified in opposition, in part because Mr. Bridenstine gave a speech disparaging climate change several years ago. Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, also has expressed doubts about Mr. Bridenstine.

The space agency's No. 2 position, deputy administrator, is vacant, and the Trump administration has yet to nominate anyone to fill the post. Steve Jurczyk, formerly the associate administrator for space technology, was named in late February to temporarily fill Mr. Lightfoot's previous job.

NASA is also lacking a chief of staff.

Still, the agency continues to explore the cosmos. Next month, it is scheduled to launch the Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite, or TESS, a space telescope that is to search for planets around other stars.

The InSight spacecraft is due to launch in May for Mars, and the Parker Solar Probe is expected to begin a yearslong mission to study the sun in July.

In August, Boeing and SpaceX both plan to perform their first tests of new capsules that are to carry NASA astronauts into orbit, and the Osiris-Rex spacecraft will rendezvous with an asteroid, Bennu, after a two-year journey.

Mr. Lightfoot's 406-day term as acting administrator is by far the longest NASA has operated without a permanent leader, eclipsing the 176 days that passed at the start of the Obama administration before Mr. Bolden was confirmed.

Senator Bill Nelson of Florida, a Democrat who has led opposition to Mr. Bridenstine's appointment, praised Mr. Lightfoot in a statement. "The country owes Robert a debt of gratitude for his many years of outstanding service and leadership at NASA," Mr. Nelson said.

He also alluded to the impasse over Mr. Bridenstine. "Longer term, the White House needs to nominate a space professional for NASA administrator who will actually garner strong bipartisan support," Mr. Nelson said. "The current nominee doesn't have the votes."

There's No One Steering The Ship At NASA

Drifting for a year without an administrator, the agency's acting chief quits as manned missions are poised to resume.

By Justin Bachman

Bloomberg News, March 12, 2018

NASA's acting administrator, Robert Lightfoot Jr., plans to retire at the end of April after a 30-year career with the agency. His departure makes a bad situation worse for the organization that put the first humans on the moon.

In its second year without a permanent leader, NASA has been trying to pivot back toward human spaceflight for the first time since the Space Shuttle program ended in 2011. Simultaneously, it faces critical decisions about how to end America's role in the International Space Station. Now the career agency hand who had been steering the ship is leaving, too.

Lightfoot, a former director of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, began his career as a test engineer on the shuttle engine program. In a memo to NASA employees Monday, he said his announcement was made with "bittersweet feelings."

"I leave NASA blessed with a career full of memories of stunning missions, cherished friendships, and an incredible hope for what is yet to come," he wrote. A NASA spokesman declined to comment.

Lightfoot has served as the interim director since January 2017, when Charles Bolden resigned at the end of the Obama administration. President Donald Trump's nominee to lead NASA, Oklahoma Congressman Jim Bridenstine, has been entangled in a partisan fight in the Senate.

Bridenstine, a Republican, "has the highest regard" for Lightfoot, "who has dedicated his life to the world's greatest

space agency," spokeswoman Sheryl Kaufman said in an email. The congressman "remains optimistic" regarding a confirmation vote soon, she said.

Florida Senator Bill Nelson, who has led Senate Democrats in their unified opposition to Bridenstine, said there are "a number of highly qualified individuals" at NASA who could replace Lightfoot. "Longer term, the White House needs to nominate a space professional for NASA administrator who will actually garner strong bipartisan support," Nelson said in a statement. "The current nominee doesn't have the votes."

NASA's Acting Administrator To Retire Without A Clear Successor

By Ben Guarino

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

Robert M. Lightfoot Jr., who has served as acting administrator at NASA for more than a year, said Monday that he will retire from his position in April. No immediate announcement was made on who will follow him.

In an agencywide memo, Lightfoot wrote that he had "bittersweet feelings" about the decision. He also said he will "work with the White House on a smooth transition to the new administrator."

NASA has been without a permanent administrator since Charles Bolden, a former astronaut and retired Marine Corps aviator, resigned the day that President Trump took office last year. The second-in-command, deputy administrator Dava Newman, also left the agency as Trump was inaugurated. In stepped Lightfoot, who had held NASA's highest-ranking non-appointee position.

In September, Trump nominated Jim Bridenstine, a Republican congressman who represents Oklahoma in the House, to be NASA administrator. Bridenstine previously worked as the director of the Tulsa Air and Space Museum. He supports an increased role of private industry in spaceflight.

Bridenstine's confirmation process has not gone smoothly. At a hearing in November, Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) argued that Bridenstine lacked the ability to be "a leader who has the ability to unite scientists, engineers, commercial space interests, policymakers and the public on a shared vision for future space exploration." Senate Democrats have been joined by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) in opposition to Bridenstine, putting the nominee's future in jeopardy.

In an email late Monday, a NASA representative wrote that "the White House may direct anyone who qualifies under the Vacancies Reform Act to serve as acting NASA Administrator." The agency also has no chief of staff or deputy director.

Of the seats normally filled by scientists or engineers in Washington, many remain empty. The White House does not

have a science adviser, and other positions in the Office of Science and Technology Policy remain vacant. Trump also has yet to appoint members to the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.

Below is a copy of Lightfoot's memo:

NASA team,

It is with bittersweet feelings that I am announcing I will be retiring from the agency on April, 30, 2018. I will work with the White House on a smooth transition to the new administrator.

I cannot express enough my gratitude to the entire NASA team for the support during my career and especially the last 14 months as your acting administrator. The grit and determination you all demonstrate every day in achieving our missions of discovery and exploration are simply awe inspiring. I leave NASA blessed with a career full of memories of stunning missions, cherished friendships, and an incredible hope for what is yet to come.

When I look back on my time at NASA, I can't help but think about the people. From my friends in the test areas at Marshall and Stennis, to the folks that I sat with on console launching shuttles, to the Marshall team when I was the center director, and now as the acting administrator to the entire NASA team — what a privilege to work with such dedicated and passionate people every day.

There is no way I would be where I am today without having had such amazing opportunities and such a great set of colleagues. I've learned in so many ways that at NASA we make the impossible possible — whether it is with the missions we do or whether it is a small town kid who was able to lead the greatest agency in the world.

NASA's history has many chapters with each of us having a part. I've written my part and now the pen is in your hands — each one of you. I know you will make this nation proud as you accomplish the many missions you have in front of you. For me, I look forward to more time with my family and closest friends, and cheering the NASA team on from the outside.

God speed to all of you and thanks for the opportunity to be part of something truly bigger than each of us individually! It's been an unbelievable ride!

Sincerely,

Robert

White House Aides Blur The Legal Lines Between Partisans And Public Servants

By Julie Hirschfeld Davis

New York Times, March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump's social media director, Dan Scavino Jr., posted a message on his government Twitter account calling for the defeat of a Republican congressman who had angered the president.

His West Wing counselor, Kellyanne Conway, weighed in on the Alabama Senate race during television interviews from the White House lawn.

His son-in-law, Jared Kushner, used his White House title on a news release for Mr. Trump's re-election bid.

All had complaints filed against them alleging violations of the Hatch Act, the federal law that since 1939 has barred government officials from using their positions to engage in partisan politics.

Over the past 14 months there have been at least eight complaints against White House officials for potential violations of the statute, according to a review by the agency charged with enforcing it. That number has put the Trump White House on a pace to far surpass the complaints against the staff of his predecessor.

A handful of high-profile violations and the increased number of complaints suggest that, more than a year after taking office, Mr. Trump — who has openly defied many norms of government ethics and transparency — is surrounded by aides who blur the line between their roles as partisans and public servants, sometimes skirting or disregarding altogether decades-old standards that govern the behavior of senior White House officials.

"This is an overall attitude this White House has about these rules, that they are just not all that important or they do not apply," said Lawrence M. Noble, the senior director and general counsel of the Campaign Legal Center, the nonpartisan ethics watchdog group that filed the complaints against Ms. Conway. "There are clearly gray areas, but it's not like occasionally they stumble into the gray areas; this seems to be willful ignoring of the rules."

The Office of Special Counsel, the federal agency which enforces the Hatch Act, has an email inbox and telephone hotline devoted to fielding complaints, and, according to one official, has heard about more potential violations since Mr. Trump was sworn in than is typical, particularly three years before a general election campaign. Over the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, for example, the office received a total of six complaints about conduct by White House officials — a number Mr. Trump's administration has already surpassed.

Not every complaint has led to a finding of a violation, and Mr. Trump's aides argue that many are meritless claims by political opponents looking for ways to undercut the president. They also point to the increase in the use of Twitter and other platforms that make it more difficult to maintain a bright line between the official and the political.

"There are unprecedented efforts by outside political groups to use Hatch Act complaints as a vehicle to obstruct this administration, and exponential proliferation of social media platforms and messaging in this administration compared to any previous," said Hogan Gidley, a deputy White House press secretary.

But the office recommended last week that Mr. Trump take disciplinary action against Ms. Conway, for having breached the statute during two television interviews late last year in which she used her official title while arguing in favor of Roy S. Moore, the Republican Senate candidate in Alabama, and against his Democratic rival, Doug Jones, with the White House as her backdrop. White House officials have suggested that Mr. Trump is not likely to punish her.

At the same time, the office received a complaint against Mr. Kushner for having briefed White House officials during a staff meeting in the West Wing about Mr. Trump's re-election campaign, and its recent hire of Brad Parscale to lead the effort. It was the second Hatch Act complaint lodged against Mr. Kushner in two weeks, after one that cited his use of his White House title on a Trump campaign news release announcing Mr. Parscale's position.

White House officials say they have made compliance with the Hatch Act a priority, providing multiple briefings to West Wing officials about how to avoid violations. The White House Counsel's Office has stepped up its warnings to employees about the law since Mr. Trump officially kicked off his re-election bid, circulating fresh guidance from the Office of Special Counsel last week informing staff that, among other things, they must not use MAGA — the acronym for Mr. Trump's 2016 "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan — in official communications or in their social media accounts.

When she appeared on Thursday at a campaign event in western Pennsylvania for Rick Saccone, the Republican candidate in a special congressional election to be held on Tuesday, Ms. Conway made sure to note that she was there in her "personal capacity." And when Mr. Trump tweeted on Friday to "Vote Rick" using the MAGA hashtag, Stefan C. Passantino, the chief ethics lawyer in the counsel's office, circulated an email warning White House officials not to retweet it, according to White House officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss internal communications.

Previous administrations have also run afoul of the Hatch Act, particularly in the run-up to presidential elections. Two Obama administration cabinet officials — Kathleen Sebelius, his secretary of health and human services; and Julián Castro, his secretary of housing and urban development — were cited for violations during Mr. Obama's eight-year term, and a third, Hilda L. Solis, the secretary of labor, was investigated before she resigned.

Concerned about appearing to use his office or his administration improperly to boost Hillary Clinton's candidacy, Mr. Obama barred members of his cabinet from addressing the Democratic National Convention in 2016.

Since Mr. Trump's inauguration, the Office of Special Counsel has found violations by at least three officials, including Ms. Conway. It issued a warning letter to Mr.

Scavino for a tweet calling for the defeat in a primary of Representative Justin Amash, Republican of Michigan, who had been critical of the president. And it reported last year that Nikki R. Haley, the ambassador to the United Nations, had breached the Hatch Act in June by retweeting Mr. Trump's endorsement of a South Carolina congressional candidate.

Many other complaints have been investigated and dismissed. The office received a flood of calls in January, during a brief government shutdown, after the White House comment line informed callers that their inquiries could not be answered "because congressional Democrats are holding government funding for our troops and other national security priorities hostage to an unrelated immigration debate."

While the use of a taxpayer-funded public comment line to spread a partisan message was unusual in the view of many ethics experts, it was not considered a violation of the Hatch Act because it did not advocate for or against any one candidate.

The administration can largely decide how strictly to enforce the Hatch Act, because the agency charged with policing it has no power to mete out discipline. The Office of Special Counsel refers violations by White House officials and presidential appointees to the president, while cabinet secretaries determine how and whether to punish high-ranking officials in their agencies. In cases involving rank-and-file federal employees, the office can request disciplinary action by the Merit Systems Protection Board, a quasi-judicial agency.

Mr. Trump's lawyers have suggested in recent days that they take a relatively narrow view of the conduct prohibited by the Hatch Act, which has exemptions only for the president and the vice president. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, told reporters last week that Ms. Conway's interviews — in which she clearly expressed support for Mr. Moore and opposition to Mr. Jones — did not violate the Hatch Act because she was expressing the president's policy position.

The White House Counsel's Office had made the same assertion to the Office of Special Counsel, which rejected the argument in its report reprimanding Ms. Conway. The office said the position "lacks merit," and "would render meaningless the Hatch Act's prohibition against using one's official authority or influence for the purpose of interfering with or affecting the result of an election."

If the White House's position were adopted, the office said, "federal employees in their official capacity would be free to express electoral preferences and claim immunity from the Hatch Act by hiding behind the president's statements about candidates and declaring they were merely carrying out their official duties in support of the administration's agenda."

Watchdog groups said they were concerned that the argument gave tacit permission to Trump administration officials to disregard the law.

"The White House made clear that not only are they not going to take disciplinary action, but they didn't even accept the finding of a clear-cut case," said Noah Bookbinder, the executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a nonpartisan watchdog group that filed the complaints against Mr. Kushner. "Which seems to send the message to White House employees that they can do whatever they like."

Kellyanne Conway Broke The Law. The White House Shrugs.

Washington Post, March 12, 2018

IN THE early days of the Trump administration, presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway ran afoul of ethics rules when she urged the president's supporters to buy products under his daughter's brand. The White House said she was being provided with additional ethics training and recurrence was "highly unlikely." Some thought stronger disciplinary action should have been taken, but at least there was some acknowledgment of wrongdoing and an implied promise to do better.

Unfortunately, it's not clear the training did much good, as the Office of Special Counsel made clear recently in finding Ms. Conway in violation of federal law barring the mixing of partisan politics with official government business. More troubling than the latest violation was the White House's refusal to do anything about it or even acknowledge it.

In a letter to President Trump, Special Counsel Henry J. Kerner reported that Ms. Conway twice violated the Hatch Act in the lead-up to Alabama's 2017 special Senate election. Federal employees are prohibited from using their official authority or influence to affect the outcome of an election; partisan remarks are permitted only when federal employees are speaking in their personal capacity.

At issue were two television interviews in which Ms. Conway appeared in her official capacity and expressed political views about Democrat Doug Jones and Republican Roy Moore. "Folks, don't be fooled," she said on Fox News of Mr. Jones. "He'll be a vote against tax cuts. He's weak on crime, weak on borders. He's strong on raising your taxes. He's terrible for property owners." Somehow — and with a straight face — the White House tried to argue that such language (on CNN, she said Mr. Jones was "against national security," "against life" and "out of step for Alabama voters") was not advocating for or against the election of any particular candidate.

Keep in mind that her unprompted harangue on Fox News about Mr. Jones, who subsequently won the election, came in response to a question about tax reform and

Democratic opposition. Also keep in mind that she had received regular and repeated Hatch Act training and guidance. Contrast her case with those of two officials in the Obama administration — former Cabinet secretaries Kathleen Sebelius and Julian Castro — who were found to have violated the Hatch Act. Both cooperated with the special counsel, explained they didn't intend to break the law but admitted their errors and promised to be more careful in the future (which they were).

Once again we need to remind ourselves: Thumbing your nose at the rule of law is not normal, and it is not okay.

Trump's VA Is Purging Civil Servants

By Isaac Arnsdorf

Politico Magazine, March 12, 2018

Last June, President Donald Trump fulfilled a campaign promise by signing a bipartisan bill to make it easier to fire employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The law, a rare rollback of the federal government's strict civil-service job protections, was intended as a much-needed fix for an organization widely perceived as broken. "VA accountability is essential to making sure that our veterans are treated with the respect they have so richly earned through their blood, sweat and tears," Trump said that day. "Those entrusted with the sacred duty of serving our veterans will be held accountable for the care they provide."

At the time, proponents of the bill repeatedly emphasized that it would hold everyone—especially top officials—accountable: "Senior executives," stressed Senate Veterans Committee chair Johnny Isakson; "medical directors," specified Trump; anyone who "undermined trust" in the VA, according to Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin. Shulkin advocated for the measure, called the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, by highlighting a case in which the agency had to wait 30 days to fire a worker caught watching porn with a patient.

"I do not see this as a tool that's going to lead to mass firings," Shulkin said last June. "I would never support that as secretary. I see this as a tool that's going to be used on a small number of people, who clearly have deviated from accepted practices and norms."

The law's effect was nearly instantaneous: Firings rose 60 percent during the second half of 2017, after the law took effect, compared to the first half of 2017. Since June, the VA has removed 1,704 of its 370,000 employees.

But if top officials were the target of the law, a ProPublica investigation suggests the legislation misfired. In practice, the new law is overwhelmingly being used against the rank and file. Since it took effect, the VA has fired four senior leaders. The other 1,700 terminated people were low-level staffers with titles such as housekeeper (133 lost their jobs), nursing assistant (101 ousted) and food service worker (59 terminated), according to data posted by the VA.

VA spokesman Curt Cashour defended the high proportion of low-ranking employees among the terminations. "Culture spans the entire organization," he said in a statement. "As with any government agency or business, VA has more rank-and-file workers than senior leaders, and we hold them accountable when warranted, regardless of rank or position."

Some of the fired workers surely deserved it. But some were guilty of minor infractions—such as arriving late to work—that wouldn't previously have received as harsh a punishment, according to union officials and a letter sent to Shulkin on February 26 by six Democratic senators.

Indeed, some Congress members who supported the bill are now expressing reservations. "My intention was not to get rid of housekeepers if these are things that can be corrected with training and HR and management," said Tim Walz, a Democrat from Minnesota and the ranking member on the House veterans committee, at a hearing in mid-February. Democratic Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, one of the bill's co-sponsors, wrote to Shulkin on February 13, expressing concern that "the initial data indicates that removal efforts are being targeted on less senior, frontline employees rather than managers who play a critical role in establishing cultures of accountability that protect whistleblowers."

What's more, it's not just junior VA staffers who are losing their jobs. Whistleblowers and people who filed discrimination complaints are among those being fired, in several cases reviewed by ProPublica. That means a law intended to protect whistleblowers may be doing the opposite. Retaliating against such employees remains illegal, but the new law makes it much harder for them to defend themselves.

"The VA feels they can do whatever they want with people with impunity," said Eric Pines, an employment lawyer who represents multiple fired VA workers. "It's a day-and-night feel since the Trump administration came into office." (The Office of Special Counsel, or OSC, an independent federal agency that investigates retaliation against whistleblowers, said it's too soon to say if complaints have increased since the law took effect.)

Trump's State of the Union address in January suggested that the VA is just the beginning. The president wants to make it easier to terminate workers in every federal agency. "All Americans deserve accountability and respect, and that is what we are giving them," the president said in the speech. "So tonight, I call on the Congress to empower every Cabinet secretary with the authority to reward good workers and to remove federal employees who undermine the public trust or fail the American people."

Advocates of shrinking the federal bureaucracy cheered. Concerned Veterans for America (CVA), an organization backed by the Koch brothers, tweeted, "The VA

Accountability Act has started to work, now President Trump is ready to replicate it across other federal agencies." Representative Barry Loudermilk, a Republican from Georgia, who had introduced legislation that would expedite firing across the federal government, issued a statement asserting that his bill was "answering President Trump's call for Congress to empower cabinet secretaries with the authority to inject merit back into the federal workforce."

Trump's remarks worried defenders of the civil service. "Make no mistake: this is a plan to politicize federal employment and allow the administration to hire and fire on the basis of politics rather than merit," J. David Cox Sr., national president of the American Federation of Government Employees, said in a statement. The government workforce is different from the private sector, civil service advocates say, for good reason: It's all that stands between the smooth administration of government services and a return to 19th-century habits of politicians doling out jobs to unqualified cronies.

And some fear the experience at the VA shows that removing protections against firing will only encourage more firings. The agency had more than 40,000 job vacancies even before the wave of firings. If reducing the workforce makes the VA less effective, it will only reinforce the argument that the agency is broken and needs to be cleaned out. "We really do need to modernize the civil service," said Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit providing leadership training to federal employees. "However, firing feds faster is not going to result in the better government we all want."

In the Oval Office, Trump displays a portrait of Andrew Jackson, an iconoclastic populist he admires. Jackson was determined to shake up Washington when he took office in 1829. He was convinced that the then-tiny federal bureaucracy was corrupt, complacent and working to undermine him. Jackson made disloyalty to him a disqualification for government service and replaced officeholders with political allies and old pals. A senator famously defended Jackson's appointments by saying "to the victor belong the spoils."

The "spoils system" lasted until 1881, when a thwarted job-seeker named Charles Guiteau, believing his campaign support for James Garfield entitled him to a diplomatic post, shot the new president. Congress responded with the Pendleton Act, establishing that government hiring should be based on merit, not politics. The civil service expanded in step with federal power in the 20th century. As part of a wave of post-Watergate reforms, the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 required cause to fire federal workers. The law established the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) to decide disputes.

Employment lawyers say that advocates of reduced civil-service protections exaggerate the obstacles to firing federal workers. The process deters some managers from taking action, according to a Government Accountability Office review, while multiple surveys of federal supervisors concluded that poor performers amount to only 1 to 3 percent of the federal workforce. A more recent MSPB survey found supervisors split on whether federal employees have too many rights.

When federal agencies do try to remove an employee, they almost always succeed. In the past five years, the MSPB has reversed just 4 percent of the cases it reviewed, according to the board's reports. The VA has a worse record: It loses at the MSPB 16 percent of the time. "The VA screws it up more than most," said Debra D'Agostino, a lawyer who represents federal workers. "But that's the fault of HR, not a problem with the law."

The notion of making it easier to fire VA employees gained traction in 2014 after news broke that officials at the Phoenix VA hospital were manipulating records to hide long wait times. CVA, which was founded in 2012 and pushed for fast-track firings as early as 2013, seized on the scandal to organize a protest and lobby Congress to pass a new law curbing protections for VA officials. The resulting measure targeted only the most senior career employees. Among the first fired was the director of the offending Phoenix facility.

The Phoenix scandal hardened an already bad reputation for the VA, even though the agency's health care remains popular with veterans. An independent assessment ordered up by the 2014 law concluded that long waits weren't widespread and the quality of VA health care was generally as good or better than in other health systems. But politically, the damage was done.

CVA insisted that the 2014 reforms didn't go far enough, and pushed for reducing protections for all VA employees, not just senior leaders. In 2015, a CVA policy task force proposed turning the VA into a government-chartered nonprofit corporation (like Amtrak), complete with the "authority to hire and fire employees in a manner consistent with that in the private sector." (CVA didn't answer a request for comment.)

Candidate Trump embraced CVA's position. Three of the 10 proposals in his campaign's plan to reform the VA involved firing or punishing bad employees. As president, Trump gave the former head of CVA's policy task force, Darin Selnick, significant influence over veterans policy at the White House Domestic Policy Council. Selnick and like-minded allies in the administration have clashed with Shulkin over the direction of the VA, particularly over how much it should rely on private health care.

Meanwhile, the Accountability Act seemed to be something everyone could get behind. It passed the House 368 to 55 and the Senate by a voice vote. Shulkin, Trump

and CVA have all touted it as a major accomplishment, as have lawmakers and veterans groups. The White House referred questions to the VA, where spokesman Cashour said the law "is one of the most significant federal civil service reforms in decades and is helping instill across the department the type of workforce accountability veterans and taxpayers deserve."

The new law passed just after a federal appeals court overturned the dismissal of Sharon Helman as director of the Phoenix VA. Under the 2014 law, Helman could get an initial decision from an administrative judge at the MSPB but wasn't permitted to appeal to the board's three presidentially appointed members. The appeals court found that procedure unconstitutional on the grounds that it gave too much power to the administrative judge.

The new VA accountability law took a different approach, one that's even tougher on fired employees. Now, senior executives can't appeal to the MSPB at all. They have the right to sue in federal court, but that's a lengthy and costly process. Lower-level employees can still bring their cases to the MSPB, but functionally can't appeal to the three-member panel—because Trump hasn't appointed anyone to it. "They've hamstrung the ability of the board to do its job," said John Palguta, a retired MSPB official and expert on the federal workforce.

The new law makes it much quicker and easier for the VA to fire people. Instead of having to show that the majority of the evidence supports a firing, the agency needs only "substantial" evidence, a much lower threshold. "Almost the allegation itself is enough," said Don Edge, a union officer in San Antonio.

Critics are calling that an unfair double standard in the wake of a blistering report, by the VA's inspector general, that faulted Shulkin for misusing taxpayer resources on a trip to Europe. Shulkin has disputed the investigation's findings, saying the IG's office selectively omitted countervailing evidence and didn't give him enough time to respond to the allegations.

That, critics say, is precisely how the new law treats VA employees. "Why is no one putting together how ironic this is that he can dispute this report and still have his job?" said Ibidun Roberts, an attorney with the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). "Our employees are fired for much less."

The VA now must provide written notice to fire an employee, but not 30 days' notice as before. The employee has only seven days to respond, instead of as many as 30 in the past. Once the VA finalizes its decision, the employee has seven days to appeal, down from 30. The law also stripped the MSPB's power to lighten penalties—the judge can uphold or reverse a firing, but can't reduce it to a suspension.

Plaintiffs' lawyers contend that discriminatory firings have increased. JP Chandler, a longtime member of the VA's police force in Los Angeles, was fired in November after he failed a firearms test because of a problem with his eyeglasses. Failing the test wasn't a fireable offense at the time (he could have been reassigned to another role), but managers changed the policy and then used it to fire Chandler. Chandler alleges the removal was retaliation for an age discrimination complaint he filed after being passed over for a promotion. That complaint is still pending with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (Chandler said he also mistakenly left a shift a few hours early once.) "I have worked hard 60+ hours a week for the last 3 years for my department because I CARE for the Veterans and their families," Chandler said in a written complaint he provided to ProPublica. "Suddenly, I became the 'bad guy' after filing an EEO complaint, and [was] targeted."

A file clerk in West Virginia was fired after making an EEOC complaint that she needed accommodations for PTSD, according to her lawyer, Kevin Owen. Another of his clients, a veteran who worked as a cook, got fired for an argument that someone else started and became homeless. "Since he's homeless he can't pay his cellphone bill, and I don't know how to find him," Owen said.

Protecting whistleblowers was the second objective of the VA law. It created a new unit, the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection, to field their complaints. But critics say the law is having the opposite effect, because whistleblowers are now less able to defend themselves against emboldened managers. "It makes people more afraid to come forward for fear of being fired and having less protection to challenge it," said Cathie McQuiston, the AFGE's deputy general counsel. Cashour, the VA spokesman, said employees who believe they face retaliation should contact the accountability office.

But some suspect the accountability office is acting on management's behalf instead of defending people who reveal problems or wrongdoing. Doug Massey, a union official who works at the Board of Veterans Appeals, complained about a supervisor to Peter O'Rourke, the head of the accountability office. An investigation was launched, Massey said—but it focused on Massey, not the supervisor, and was conducted by an aide to the supervisor Massey had complained about. (The investigation centers on claims that Massey had created a hostile work environment, allegations he said were fabricated in retribution for his complaint.) O'Rourke, who became the VA's chief of staff on February 16, referred questions to Cashour, who disputed Massey's account. "Those claims are false," Cashour said, adding that the investigation of Massey was warranted. "VA does not tolerate retaliation."

Another employee, Melissa Mason, was fired after bringing concerns to management. ProPublica reviewed hundreds of pages of emails, complaints and responses in her case—including internal documents written by the VA.

Ironically, the problem stemmed from the fact that Mason, then the chief of medical administration service for the VA system that covers the regions of Laredo, Corpus Christi and more in Texas, wanted to avoid the very problems that led to scandal in Phoenix. A 30-year veteran of the agency with a spotless record, Mason, 54, complained of a long backlog in medical appointments. When a supervisor wondered why her metrics looked bad, she answered that the problem was a lack of physicians. She didn't want to reset the clock on appointments, which she said "would look like we are gaming the system ... to make the number look good."

Eventually, after Mason escalated the issue to a more senior supervisor, she was reprimanded for "not following instructions" on a training document, according to a memo obtained by ProPublica. Mason countered that she lacked staff and had received conflicting directions. The reprimand was eventually withdrawn.

Still, sensing hostility, Mason asked to be transferred to a different facility. She filed a whistleblower complaint with OSC, claiming mismanagement and retaliation.

In March 2017, Mason was given a performance-based bonus but two months later received her first-ever unsatisfactory review. She agreed to take a demotion and pay cut. At that point she was just hoping to stick it out until she became eligible to retire.

But Mason's situation kept getting worse. She started facing investigations, which never went anywhere, for belittling a subordinate (who denied it ever happened) and for falsifying time cards (because she helped log out an employee who had to leave for a family emergency). She later discovered, through documents she obtained using the Freedom of Information Act, that officials said to be careful what documents they showed her because she's a "documented whistleblower."

With her termination looking increasingly likely, in August last year she expressed her frustrations in an email to VA chief Shulkin. "I don't want to be a whistleblower," she wrote. "I don't want to be in the papers, on TV, interviewed or in front of Congress. ... I told the truth. I don't want to be punished for telling the truth. I just want to be left alone to do a job."

On August 22, Mason received notice that she was being fired under the new law for conduct unbecoming a federal employee, failure to follow policies and procedures, and lack of candor.

She left work only to be given a temporary reprieve: As long as OSC was investigating her whistleblower complaint, the VA couldn't end her employment. OSC told the VA to let her return to work pending its review.

"Ms. Mason has cases that are currently active before the Office of Special Counsel and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission," said VA spokesman Cashour. "The Department of Veterans Affairs is cooperating fully in these matters to ensure her rights as a federal employee are protected. We cannot comment further on these pending matters."

Today, Mason remains on the job—but she doesn't feel shielded by the Whistleblower Protection Act. "I'm so tired of the BS," she confided to a coworker in an instant message. "They can still mess with me. Just in a different way."

White House Officials Alarmed At Education Secretary's '60 Minutes' Performance

By Kaitlan Collins And Kevin Liptak

CNN, March 12, 2018

White House officials were alarmed by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos' struggle to answer basic questions about the nation's schools and failure to defend the administration's newly proposed school safety measures during a tour of television interviews Sunday and Monday, according to two sources familiar with their reaction.

Though DeVos was sworn in to her Cabinet position 13 months ago, she stumbled her way through a pointed "60 Minutes" interview with CBS' Lesley Stahl Sunday night and was unable to defend her belief that public schools can perform better when funding is diverted to the expansion of public charter schools and private school vouchers. At one point, she admitted she hasn't "intentionally" visited underperforming schools.

"I hesitate to talk about all schools in general because schools are made up of individual students attending them," DeVos said, as Stahl suggested that DeVos visit those underperforming schools.

Things worsened as DeVos continued her cable television tour Monday morning. The White House released its proposals for school safety measures after a shooting in Florida killed 17 people. Part of the proposal includes a task force to examine ways to prevent future mass shootings, headed by DeVos. Though the proposals don't include raising the age limit to purchase firearms from 18 to 21 – as President Donald Trump once suggested – DeVos told Savannah Guthrie on NBC's "Today" show that "everything is on the table."

"The plan is a first step in a more lengthy process," DeVos said, adding that she does not think that arming teachers with assault weapons would be "an appropriate thing."

"I don't think assault weapons carried in schools carried by any school personnel is the appropriate thing," DeVos said. "But again, I think this is an issue that is best decided at the local level by communities and by states."

"The point is that schools should have this tool if they choose to use the tool. Communities should have the tools, states should have the tool, but nobody should be mandated to do it," she said.

White House press secretary Sarah Sanders declined to weigh in on DeVos' performance, saying school safety and other policies are the "focus of the President – not one or two interviews, but actual policy."

Asked whether Trump tuned in to "60 Minutes," Sanders said, "I'm not sure if he saw the whole thing or not."

White House scolds Cabinet officials after embarrassing ethics reports

DeVos tweeted Monday afternoon: "Here's what we shared with @60Minutes, which of course they didn't show you: Michigan, like much of the nation, isn't doing well enough to prepare students. Scores are stagnant. Students need more options, and we must rethink our approach to education."

"Also missing from @60Minutes: students at charter schools in Detroit are doing 2x better than their peers. The reforms are helping, but there's so much more to do. We must help all students be better prepared for strong futures," she added.

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pic.twitter.com/GJ0kdI2GPE— Betsy DeVos (@BetsyDeVosED) March 12, 2018

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<https://t.co/nZ8iqHhLBd> pic.twitter.com/xoiegl2VF1— Betsy DeVos (@BetsyDeVosED) March 12, 2018

DeVos is just the latest member of Trump's Cabinet to come under scrutiny. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson, Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt were all scolded by officials from the White House counsel's office and the Cabinet liaison after a series of embarrassing and questionable ethical behavior at their respective agencies.

The Point | Betsy DeVos' trainwreck interview on '60 Minutes'

This isn't the first time DeVos has made headlines. She also struggled to answer education questions during her contentious confirmation hearing before the Senate last January. At one point, she told Democrat Sen. Chris Murphy that some schools may require guns to fight off grizzly bears.

"I will refer back to Sen. (Mike) Enzi and the school he was talking about in Wyoming. I think probably there, I would

imagine that there is probably a gun in the schools to protect from potential grizzlies," she had said.

In the end, Vice President Mike Pence had to break the tie to confirm her nomination, making her the first Cabinet nominee in history to require a tie-breaking vote by the vice president to be confirmed.

DeVos Has Not 'Intentionally' Visited A Struggling Michigan Public School

By Eileen Sullivan

New York Times, March 12, 2018

WASHINGTON — In a remarkable admission, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said in a television interview on Sunday that she has not "intentionally" visited public schools in Michigan that are struggling and underperforming.

President Trump's top education advocate was responding to a question during an interview on CBS' "60 Minutes" about whether she had seen the struggling schools in her home state of Michigan, considered among the worst in the country.

"I have not — I have not — I have not intentionally visited schools that are underperforming," said Ms. DeVos, a billionaire philanthropist who has pumped millions of dollars into Michigan to promote school choice and vouchers for private and parochial schools.

School choice is the centerpiece of Ms. DeVos's education platform. She has spent most of her professional life fighting for loosening the federal government's grip on public education while promoting parochial and charter schools in Michigan — many of which her family has bankrolled.

Michigan's charter school initiatives have not yielded consistently strong results across the state. In a 2016 report by the Education Trust-Midwest, the state's elementary and secondary school system was among the weakest in the country and continuing to decline.

"Michigan schools need to do better. There is no doubt about it," Ms. DeVos said in the interview.

The president recently tapped Ms. DeVos to lead a new Federal Commission on School Safety as part of the Trump administration's response to deadly mass shootings. Mr. Trump has previously denounced these types of commissions, and as recently as Saturday, Mr. Trump said at a rally that these panels were empty solutions that Washington falls back on instead of fixing problems.

In the CBS interview, Ms. DeVos said arming trained teachers — one of the Trump administration's plans to prevent school shootings — is a decision that should be left to states.

"Every state and every community is going to address this issue in a different way," she said. Asked whether the